SHADOW SLAVE
III
PRINCE OF NOTHING

SHADOW SLAVE

Volume-3

Prince of Nothing

Chapter-351: Once Again

Once again, Sunny found himself in the endless space between dream and reality. All around him, there was nothing but a boundless black void, which was illuminated by a myriad of bright stars. Between those stars, countless strings of silver light were woven into a beautiful and inconceivably complex pattern.

Once again, he felt as though he had glimpsed the inner workings of the Spell. Was it just an illusion, or was he able to see more now? It was almost as if his eyes were now able to discern a hint of meaning behind the unimaginable, titanic brilliance of the ethereal weave.

…He had the eyes of Weaver now, after all.

With a pained moan, Sunny forced himself to look away from the strings of silver light. The magnitude of the secret hidden in this cosmic pattern was so immense that just thinking about it could drive him mad. The Forgotten Shore had taught him an important lesson, and it was that one had to be careful about what they looked upon.

Some things were not meant to be seen by humans.

…Not to mention that he had other things to think about.

"Curse it! Curse it all! Curse all of you!"

His voice disappeared into the darkness, full of indescribable fury, bitterness, and sorrow. No one was there to hear it… except for the Spell, which chose to tactfully remain silent.

Breathing heavily, Sunny clenched his fists and closed his eyes.

He didn't know what brought him more rage and pain — the fact that he had lost Neph, or the fact that his secret had been revealed. Both were too bitter to swallow.

All that time, all that suffering… and for what? He had outsmarted and defeated so many powerful enemies, only for his True Name to be discovered by an ungrateful, weak, blind girl?!

After everything he had done for her...

Cassie's betrayal, perhaps, had hurt him the most.

"Curse her…"

Once again, he was a slave. He made a full circle and returned exactly to where he had started. In shackles. Only instead of nameless slavers, Nephis had become his master now.

Nephis…

Sunny gritted his teeth and groaned, a storm of conflicting emotions tearing his heart apart.

'Why did she have to do it… why…'

The pain of losing her, the hope of finding her again… was just as strong and overwhelming as the hope that she would die and disappear forever in the unforgiving hell of the Dream Realm, so that they would never have to meet again.

So that he would be free.

He clawed at his face, not knowing how to process this conflagration of feelings. For someone who had spent most of his life alone, not caring for anything, this was all just too much.

Luckily, time in this boundless void was a strange concept, so he had an eternity to try and come to terms with his new reality. The Spell kept silent, as though giving him a chance to do just that.

After a while — maybe hours, or maybe days, or maybe just a single second — Sunny sighed.

Some time later, he opened his mouth and whispered:

"...I won."

He had survived. Who could have thought?

Slightly more than a year ago, he was thrown into a region of the Dream Realm that no human had ever escaped, and now, he was not only returning to reality, but also doing so as one of the most powerful Sleepers in the history of the human race.

Maybe even the strongest one.

…Or the second strongest.

He had survived countless horrors, crossed a cursed sea on a boat made of demon bones, slew hundreds of Nightmare Creatures, gained experience and scars worthy of a lifetime, touched the hidden knowledge of the gods, saw a tyrant die and a new one be crowned, banished an ancient curse into the darkness of oblivion and watched as a sun died.

And now, he was about to become an Awakened. An elite among elites, a person at the very top of society, one with access to the best food, the most wealth, the highest forms of prestige. The highest… everything.

All his dreams were going to come true.

All his suffering would now be rewarded.

"I will not be sad, I will not be bitter, I will not be angry. Why should I?"

Had he gone through this nightmare to be left heartbroken on the other side? No. He had earned this joy, this delight, this triumph...

And he was going to enjoy it.

Slowly, a shaky smile appeared on Sunny's face. At first, he had to force himself, but after a while, the smile became sincere.

"That's right. Victory is supposed to be sweet. So, let's see… what should I start with?"

As if answering him, the Spell finally spoke. Its voice sounded a little

strange, as if it was continuing a sentence after being interrupted:

[...Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

Suddenly, Sunny felt his soul begin to radiate a strange heat once again.

'Crap…'

[Your shadow is complete.]

Something inside of him exploded, drowning his whole being with indescribably suffering. With a startled yelp, Sunny fell down.

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'How come… how come I end up on my ass every time I come to this place…'

The first time Sunny had appeared in the void, he was so shocked to discover the Divine Rank of his Aspect that his legs buckled. And now, due to the painful transformation happening to his soul, he ended up in the same situation again.

Because he had left the Crimson Spire, the [Soul Conduit] Attribute was gone. And without its interference, the strange process that had begun due to the saturation of the Shadow Core was finally able to continue.

It was just as painful as Sunny remembered.

Gritting his teeth to prevent himself from screaming, Sunny tried to endure that terrible agony. He was no stranger to physical pain, but this was something different. It came from the soul itself, and for that reason, was so much worse.

'Argh, damn it all!'

However, it was still not nearly as bad as the chilling torture he had gone through after consuming the drop of Weaver's blood, or the

nightmare he had endured after meeting the Black Knight for the first time.

And it didn't last as long.

After a while, the pain lessened, and then finally disappeared, leaving him feeling refreshed and whole again.

Sunny carefully stood up and looked down, checking to see if he was still in one piece.

He felt… stronger. Much, much stronger.

Stronger, faster, more resilient. Very much so.

He felt so powerful, in fact, that for a moment Sunny even entertained the idea that he had subconsciously commanded his shadow to wrap itself around his body, and was now enjoying the effect of its augmentation.

To make sure that this wasn't the case, he habitually glance down to check on the shadow.

…And froze.

'What… the hell?'

The shadow was not wrapped around his body. It was where it was supposed to be, on the unseen surface Sunny was standing on, somehow visible despite the darkness of the black void.

But it wasn't alone.

Two identical shadows were currently staring back at Sunny.

One seemed sulking and morose, and the other appeared to be joyful and friendly.

Chapter-352: Monster Core

Sunny stared at the two shadows, dumbfounded. After a while, he said in an uncertain tone:

"Am I… am I seeing things, or are there two of you?"

The shadows, of course, did not answer. They had no vocal cords, after all. However, the sulking one looked at him with contempt and shook its head in derision. The friendly one, meanwhile, looked down shyly and slightly shrugged.

'What is going on?'

Frowning, Sunny lingered for some time, and then dove into the Soul Sea. With the [Soul Conduit] Attribute gone, it was back to its usual, tenebrous appearance. The surface of the water was tranquil and still, and hundreds of motionless shadows stood silently in the darkness. Above him, shining spheres containing the Memories were circling around the…

Sunny raised his head, then flinched.

Where the black sun of the Shadow Core had once loomed above the quiet sea, there was now… two.

Two identical Shadow Cores hovered in the dark sky, shining with lightless black radiance.

He blinked.

'Two… there's two of them.'

A few minutes passed, or at least something that felt like a few minutes.

'There's two… I have two cores… why do I have two cores?'

Humans only ever had one soul core. That was a fact. Only Nightmare Creatures had more...

Sunny looked down at his hands, then made them into fists, feeling newly gained strength course through his muscles. Then, he scowled and looked up again.

"Your shadow is taking shape, your shadow is complete…"

So the Spell was not speaking about the bad-tempered shadow that had accompanied him for so long. Initially, Sunny had assumed that the shadow — and his core — were going through a transformation due to the acquisition of the thousandth fragment, perhaps evolving or even Awakening. But the Spell actually meant to say that his second shadow, and thus a second Shadow Core, were complete.

They had been assembled from the thousand shadow fragments he had collected.

Making him a… what?

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then ordered the shadows to wrap themselves around his body. The sulking one seemingly rolled its eyes before obeying the command; the friendly one seemed extremely delighted to do as he asked.

Both flowed up and covered his body. Immediately, Sunny felt his already considerable strength double…

And then triple.

His mouth hung open.

'Too powerful… this is too powerful…'

This was incredible!

To experiment further, he commanded one of the shadows to return to the surface of the tranquil water. A moment later, he had a shadow once again, but still enjoyed the familiar augmentation, even if it grew weaker, returning to its previous strength.

He then summoned the Midnight Shard and ordered the second shadow to wrap itself around its blade. Now, both his body and his sword were augmented. Then, he sent the sulking shadow to join the friendly one. His body was not enhanced anymore, but the austere tachi felt much sharper, more lethal, more... deadly.

Finally, he commanded one shadow to leave the Midnight Shard and cover the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Two Memories were augmented at the same time.

'Holy hell...'

This was just too good. Sunny stood silently for a while, staring into the distance.

So this was it… this was the most unique, most powerful side of his Aspect. A Divine Aspect, after all, was not necessarily more powerful than a lesser one.

But it had much more potential.

With the second core and a second shadow, the gap between Sunny and the other Awakened was going to increase. And if he was right about it… if he was right, this was only the beginning. Because if there was a second core, there would most like be the third one, and then the fourth…

Suddenly, it all made sense.

Why Nephis never seemed to be able to saturate her soul core, no matter how many shards she absorbed, no matter how many Nightmare Creatures and humans she slew. Why she had been incapacitated after killing Gunlaug. Why she was so much stronger, faster, and more powerful than him, even at his peak.

...It was because her Aspect was Divine, just like his. But she had discovered its secret much sooner than him.

As a dull pain appeared in his heart, Sunny banished the image of Changing Star from his mind and summoned the runes.

He had to make sure that his guess was right.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Below that, new runes were shimmering in the darkness. Sunny's eyes widened.

Class: Monster.

Shadow Cores: [2/7].

He stared at the glowing runes, his face calm, his heart engulfed by a dark fire.

…Monster. Two out of seven.

He was right, after all. His progression path was indeed different from all of humanity. It was harder, larger... but also so much more promising.

The promise of it was as vast as it was frightening. He was reluctant to even try to imagine the pinnacle of what he would potentially be able to achieve.

The possibilities were simply limitless.

What would a human with seven cores and the might of a titan be capable of? What obstacles would they be unable to conquer? Who would dare to stand in their way?

...Who would dare to call them their slave?

Of course, the road to creating five more cores would be long and arduous. It would take him years, if not decades. If he even manages to live that long. In fact, the magnitude and scale of such an ambition were nothing short of insane. After all, the stronger he grows, the stronger enemies he would have to face to collect their shadow fragments. It seemed all but impossible.

...Almost.

Was he really going to try?

After some time, Sunny lowered his gaze and continued to read the runes. His face looked like that of a madman — there were simultaneously a deep frown and a wide smile somehow coexisting on it, making for a strange sight.

But then, the wide smile disappeared, leaving only the frown behind.

There was something even more important waiting for him in the glow of ethereal runes. Something even more frightening.

Reaching the lowest part of the field of runes, he read:

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a miraculous shadow left behind by a dead god. As a divine shadow, you possess plenty of strange and wondrous powers. However, your existence is empty and lonesome; you mourn the passing of your former master and long to find a new one.]

Right beneath it was the description of the part of the Aspect that had cursed his life, turning it into a nightmare:

Innate Ability: [Shadow Bond].

Ability Description: [Find a worthy master and let them know your True Name. Once they recite it out loud, you will be bound to their will, unable to disobey any command. It is improper for a shadow, let alone a divine one, to walk around without a master.]

…However, the runes describing Shadow Bond were grey and lifeless, as though the Ability was now inactive.

'...Makes sense.'

He had a master now, after all. He wasn't free to walk around

without one anymore.

And speaking of it…

Right below, new runes were now shining in the darkness:

Master: Changing Star.

Sunny stared at those three words for a long time.

Who knew that just three words could bear such a crushing weight?

Such a vast and complicated meaning...

Finally, he shook his head slightly and concentrated, making the runes shine brighter, new ones appearing out of nowhere as he watched:

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Demon…

Chapter-353: Light Bringer

The runes shimmered in the tranquil darkness of the silent sea.

Name: Nephis.

True Name: Changing Star.

Just as Sunny had suspected, that True Name hid many meanings. It didn't describe a star that was always changing, but instead a star that caused change. However, there were a lot of words for change in the runic language, each hiding a unique meaning.

The one used here meant a cataclysmic change that brought ruin and disaster; sometimes bad and sometimes good, but always cruel and calamitous, wreathed in misfortune.

So, in a sense, Nephis was neither a Star of Change nor a Star of Ruin, but both; the two went hand in hand, inseparable, destined to bring both salvation and damnation to those touched by her light.

…Just like what had happened to the doomed Dreamers of the Dark City.

The Spell was really good at giving names, it seemed.

Thinking of his own True Name somberly, Sunny read further:

Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Demon.

Soul Cores: [3/7].

Soul Fragments: [2749/3000].

He stared at the last two strings, a dark expression written on his

face.

'So this… this is how far ahead of me you are.'

Then, with a heavy sigh, he looked away.

Many events of the past few months made sense now. During the fight against Gunlaug, Nephis had already been a Dormant Monster — just like he was right now, a Dreamer in possession of two Cores. It was because she had known that killing the Bright Lord would push her toward the third that she asked him to prevent Caster from attacking her in that moment of weakness.

…And in the time since, Changing Star had almost reached the fourth.

'How was she so fast?'

Sunny had made a conscious choice to avoid saturating his core during the civil war in the Bright Castle. In hindsight, this decision had turned out to be a wrong one… or maybe not.

If he had collected all thousand shadow fragments back then, he might have been dead already, killed by one of Tessai's Guards or a Nightmare Creature while completely incapacitated by the formation of the second Shadow Core.

Hell, he would have been crushed to death by a piece of falling granite if not for the [Soul Conduit] suppressing the process at the best possible moment.

…Just as always, terrible misfortune had come together with incredible luck.

But even if he had come to possess the Monster Core back then, he would have never managed to create a third, let alone get this close to the fourth one.

It was because Nephis had one big advantage over him in the matter of collecting essence.

Like every Awakened except for Sunny, she received a certain portion

of the enemy's accumulated soul essence when killing a fellow human, while he received only a single shadow fragment… or a few, at best, if the enemy was of the higher Rank than him. Which hadn't happened yet, but was inevitably going to, considering his luck.

The war against Tessai and Gemma must have been a true feast for Changing Star. Especially when slaying those experienced members of the Host that had long saturated their cores themselves.

She was always on the frontline, after all. Fighting, killing, leading her followers…

Sunny grimly stared into the darkness for a while, then slowly turned back to the runes. His eyes slid lower…

Memories: [Dream Blade], [Starlight Legion Armor], [Dawn Shard], [Dark Wing], [Nameless Sun]...

There were a few utility Memories, too, including [Evertwine] — the golden rope he knew so well. But Sunny did not pay them a lot of attention. His sight was attracted to the Nameless Sun. What was that Memory and why hadn't he seen or heard of it before?

Memory: [Nameless Sun].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [For a long time, the Nameless Sun suffered in solitude, longing for all the things that were lost. Only when she lost that longing, too, was the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore finally born.]

His eyes narrowed.

'So… she received a Memory after killing the Vessel, after all.'

An Ascended weapon of the sixth tier… Sunny wished that he could see its weave and learn what enchantments that terrible Memory

held. Whatever they were, however, the Nameless Sun was bound to be extremely powerful.

But was it enough to help Nephis survive in the ruthless hellscape of the Dream Realm? He did not know.

Frowning, Sunny continued to read the runes.

Echoes: —

Attributes: [Dreamspawn], [Nephilim], [Flame of Divinity], [The Fire].

[Dreamspawn] Attribute Description: "You are born of two worlds, belonging to both, but welcomed in neither. Your soul exists on the edge between nightmare and reality."

[Nephilim] Attribute Description: "There once were terrible creatures born of an unholy union between the divine and the profane. Nephilim were the most beautiful, and the most harrowing of them all."

[Flame of Divinity] Attribute Description: "Your soul is aflame with the light of divinity."

[The Fire] Attribute Description: "You have inherited the lineage of Sun God."

He hesitated for a bit, studying Neph's Attributes.

'So that's how it is…'

Sunny had always wondered what was her innate Attribute — the one that was at the center of all the rest, the core of her being, just like his [Fated] trait. He often thought that it was tied to drive, battle prowess, or will.

But it was not.

Instead, Neph's innate Attribute was called [Dreamspawn] and tied to her nature as a child of a Hollow mother. In a sense, she was connected to the Dream Realm — and the Nightmare Spell — from

before she had even been born.

Her core trait was duality.

If his guess was correct, that duality was further expressed after Nephis had conquered her First Nightmare and received her Aspect, as well as a new Attribute — [Nephilim]. Once again, it described a half-blood creature: half divine, half profane.

Half deific, half… Unknown?

Suddenly, he remembered how Changing Star had stopped and stared at the depiction of a radiant being engraved into the walls of the ancient mine below the Hollow Mountains.

Was that creature one of the nephilim? Or a fallen angel, from whom nephilim were supposed to be born? After all, the similarity between that creature and her own powers was hard to deny.

And then there was the last Attribute, [The Fire].

Sunny rubbed his face.

A Lineage Attribute, somewhat similar to his own Blood Weave. Finally, the meaning behind that word became clear: Lineage Memories akin to the [Drop of Ichor] were able to impart Awakened with unique Attributes that, unlike the usual ones, seemed to be hereditary.

They could be passed down through a bloodline, and at least one of the great Legacy clans — the almost destroyed Immortal Flame — possessed one.

Did all great Legacy clans — like Song or Valor — possess one, too? Was that what allowed them to rise to the very top of humanity and claim their place as great clans, in the first place?

'Those bastards have so many secrets.'

Sunny also couldn't help but notice a slight difference between [Blood Weave] and [The Fire]. While the latter was described simply as "lineage", the former was described as a "forbidden lineage".

What exactly made Blood Weave forbidden? Was it because it didn't come from a proper deity like Sun God, but from mysterious Weaver, who was a daemon? Had no one except for gods been allowed to leave behind a Lineage?

The Blood Weave was also described as a "partial" lineage, while The Fire was not.

"Questions, questions…'

With a sigh, Sunny turned to the runes once again.

Aspect: [Light Bringer].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Description: [You are a creature of light that was banished and doomed to exist in the darkness. You bring radiance and warmth to wherever you go, but with it comes indescribable longing.]

Aspect Ability: [Soul Flame].

Ability Description: [Your soul burns with the purest of flames. That flame can both restore and destroy, and is both a blessing and a curse.]

Innate Ability: [Halfbreed.]

Ability Description: [You can directly absorb a portion of the soul essence of any Nightmare Creature destroyed by your flames, as well as of any human.]

Flaw: [Pristine Soul].

Flaw Description: [You must suffer to use your power.]

Sunny dismissed the runes and was motionless for a while, thinking.

The name of the Aspect, Light Bringer, could be translated in several ways. The first rune could mean both light and fire, and the second meant either to bring or to bear, depending on context. So it could have been Fire Bearer as well, not that it made any difference.

The rest he had already known or suspected, so it didn't surprise him much. Only the strange Innate Ability, Halfbreed, was somewhat new. Nephis had mentioned once that she was capable of doing something like that, but without sharing any details.

It was also funny that the name of her Flaw was Pristine Soul, while his was Clear Conscience. What a pair they were, one lost from light, the other the source of it.

…One a master, the other a slave.

He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes for a second.

What else was there to note?

The [Soul Conduit] Attribute was gone. It seemed that the artificial sun or the Crimson Spire itself had sustained too much damage and collapsed, thus removing it. He had escaped just in time.

'I guess there's not a lot of secrets left between us now.'

Sunny was sure that there was a new rune that Nephis could summon, one reading "Slave". Just like he now had access to all the information about her, she was going to learn everything about him.

The unique nature of his cores, the shadow fragments, the true identity of the Marble Saint, the Weaver's Mask… she was going to know it all.

That could potentially complicate…

Before he could finish that thought, however, the Spell spoke again, its voice filling the black void with melodious whispers:

[The Second Seal is broken.]

[Awakening dormant powers…]

'Oh, crap! I almost forgot!'

Sunny stared into the void with wide eyes.

He was about to Awaken.

Chapter-354: Awakening

Just like after the First Nightmare, Sunny suddenly sensed something waking up within him. Back then, it felt as though this new power came from inside his soul as opposed to some external source. This time the feeling was very similar, only more intense, more defined.

It was coming from his Shadow Cores.

They were radiating an ethereal, but almost palpable heat. The energy was circulating through his entire body, changing it, making it stronger. It was somewhat similar to the strange feeling he got every time he received a shadow fragment, but so much more powerful.

…A thousand times more powerful.

And deeper, too.

With a barely audible gasp, Sunny slowly sat down and crossed his legs, then closed his eyes, concentrating on the transformation.

Every fiber of his being was soon full of the mysterious energy. The familiar euphoric feeling overwhelmed him, washing over his mind like a warm wave. However, Sunny wanted to feel more, understand more. He wanted to remember this moment in every detail.

It was his triumph, after all.

Beneath the physical changes that his body was undergoing to become better, stronger, more perfect… was another, subtle, but equally incredible change.

It was happening to his soul.

Sunny had no words to describe it, but knew that he had never

experienced anything as wonderful. The transformation of his soul was not at all painful, like the creation of the second Shadow Core had been, and not nearly as torturous as the agony that consuming a drop of divine blood had caused him.

It felt… natural, right, and profound. As though he was coming one step closer to becoming complete, to what he had always been meant to be.

A better being.

Soon, the pulsating waves of heat retreated, replaced by a wave of soothing coldness. The dull ache in his heart that had remained there, unnoticed, ever since leaving the Forgotten Shore lessened a little. His mind became calm and tranquil.

Sunny felt like... like a sword that had been tempered and fortified in a fiery crucible, a being made of cold, pure, resilient steel.

He exhaled slowly and opened his eyes.

His body felt stronger, faster, and more enduring, similar to how he felt when wrapped in the shadow. The change was sufficiently pronounced, and he knew that it would only grow greater if he used one or both of the shadows to actually augment him.

But it wasn't the main difference.

Sunny knew that the actual quality that separated Awakened from the Dreamers was not physical might, but a new innate ability. Just like Dreamers gained the ability to sense and interact with soul cores, the Awakened could do the same with soul essence.

But knowing and feeling were two different things.

Before, he could vaguely feel his Shadow Core. The feeling was elusive and ethereal, but unmistakable. He felt its emptiness at the start of his journey, and felt it brimming with power near the end.

Now, that power wasn't contained inside the Shadow Cores anymore, but broke free, flowing naturally through his entire body. It circulated slowly, coming and going from the cores, passively

saturating his bones and muscles with power.

Sunny instinctually felt that, with some practice, he would be able to direct the flow of shadow essence to concentrate it in a certain area. He could expend some amount of essence to give his arms incredible, explosive strength for a short amount of time, or fill his legs with the power to jump a dozen meters into the air.

In short, it wasn't as though he had become monstrously strong and would be all the time, crashing through walls and breaking delicate things by accident. Instead, by wisely controlling his shadow essence, he would be able to gift himself short bursts of truly inhuman physical might.

The rest of the time, he would enjoy a much smaller, but still considerable passive effect of his body being saturated with freely flowing essence.

'More training…'

Sunny could now control the shadow essence by instinct, but if he wanted to truly master it and do it more efficiently, he would have to learn from experienced Awakened. Some instructors at the Academy existed for the sole purpose of teaching newly Awakened just that, after all.

And then there was a whole other layer of combat strategy that he would have to understand and master.

Sleepers thought much like mundane humans, only with more power and tools. But battles of the Awakened were much more tactical. While essence always restored itself to the core's maximum capacity, it took time. In the reality of a battle, it was a finite resource. Because of it, one had to be smart and careful about how and when to use it.

He would also have to absorb as many shadow fragments as possible to increase the capacity of his cores. Luckily, he now had two of them, which already gave him a big advantage over the rest of the Awakened.

But this new amazing quality he had received was not the end of the

Awakening. The main event was yet to happen…

The Spell spoke again, filling him with anticipation.

[Awakening Aspect Ability…]

[...Aspect Ability acquired.]

[Aspect Ability Name: Shadow Step.]

Sunny blinked, then hurriedly summoned the runes.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened.

Class: Monster.

Shadow Cores: [2/7].

Shadow Fragments: [0/2000].

Just as expected, both of his cores were not Dormant anymore, instead becoming Awakened. The shadow fragments were consumed to fuel the Awakening, bringing him to a stark and sad zero.

'A thousand fragments, gone just like that…'

He wasn't really disappointed, though. The amount of essence consumed during the Awakening directly corresponded to the starting capacity of the core, and thus, the extent of the physical transformation that a Sleeper would go through.

By collecting a thousand fragments and fully saturating his first core, Sunny not only received a second one, but also made sure to gain the best benefits a Sleeper could dream of. Very few Awakened had ever fully saturated their cores before returning from their first journey to the Dream Realm, and now, Sunny was one of them.

The difference was not drastic, but every little bit of power counted in a life-and-death situation.

'Enough stalling!'

Impatient, he banished the thoughts of cores and shadow fragments and found the description of his new Aspect Ability.

Aspect Ability: [Shadow Step].

Ability Description: [You can move freely between shadows, traveling from one to another in an instant.]

Looking at the shimmering runes, Sunny soon discovered that there was a stupid grin on his face.

'Teleportation… that's teleportation, right?'

That was, without a doubt, a form of teleportation.

An ability such as this was a game changer. His mobility would become truly incredible. Not only would he be able to apply it to traversal, making his future ventures into the Dream Realm easier and safer, but it could also play a decisive role in a battle.

What was more deadly than an assassin capable of appearing out of nowhere and disappearing from sight in a blink of an eye?

Not many things, really...

Of course, he would have to experiment and learn the true extent of this amazing Ability… what was its range, for example? Would he be able to jump to any shadow in sight, or to any shadow in the range of his Shadow Sense? Did a shadow have to be deep and large enough for him to fit through, or would even the smallest and faintest of them do?

And what about his own shadows? Would he be able to send one to a certain spot, and then step out of it, just like Saint usually did?

He couldn't wait to learn.

But before that, there were two other things he had to see.

One was the new Memory he acquired. The other one — and the one

that filled him with nervous anticipation — was much more important.

It was the relic he was supposed to receive for mastering the first step of the Shadow Dance.

With a Legacy Relic in his hands and a Lineage Attribute coursing through his blood, Sunny would be theoretically eligible to create his own Legacy Clan. A great clan, even!

…Not that he was planning to.

But before Sunny could glance at the corresponding runes, the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[Wake up, Sunless!]

And instantly, the black void full of bright stars and silver light disappeared.

Chapter-355: Back to Reality

On one of the underground levels of the Academy hospital complex, in a small room that was filled with the massive rectangle of the dream pod and various pieces of medical equipment, a delicate girl with pale blond hair was sleeping beneath the transparent glass lid, her face surrounded by wisps of cold vapor.

Suddenly, a series of lights ignited on the surface of the pod, and the medical machinery in the room came to life, producing various noises.

A few moments later, the girl opened her striking blue eyes and screamed.

…On a top floor of a private care facility in the center of a city, in a spacious room with tall windows and a luxurious interior, a state-of-the-art sleeping pod stood silently, bathed in sunlight. An attending nurse sat in a comfortable chair beside it, monitoring the vital signs of a beautiful young man who slumbered inside.

For the past three years, there had not been a single minute when the young man was left alone. His pod was surrounded by fresh flowers, and someone was always there to keep watch.

For three years, the flowers and nurses came and went, but the young man had remained the same. Nothing about him ever changed.

Suddenly, the nurse opened her eyes wide.

A second later, the sleeping pod shone with bright light. Its lid swiftly slid sideways and hid in a special housing slot.

The figure inside was slowly raising in the air, as if pulled up by an invisible force. The beautiful young man was… levitating.

The nurse remained motionless for a few seconds, stunned. Then, she hastily ran to the panel on the wall and pressed a call button.

…In a small apartment in one of the less prestigious areas of the city, in a tiny room, a tall young woman was lying in an old and barely functioning pod. This one was possibly the last representative of its model, taken out of production a long time ago. Still, it seemed like the most luxurious thing in the apartment, by far.

The door of the room was open, letting in the sound of a news broadcast. A pleasant and confident tone was currently saying:

"...unusual number of Awakenings! Dear viewers, we… we are currently receiving a report from our correspondents, and will be able to update you on this event shortly. The representatives of the great Legacy Clans, meanwhile…"

Suddenly, the sound of the broadcast was cut out, replaced by a heavy, hopeless silence.

Soon, the sound of tentative steps could be heard, approaching the room where the pod stood.

Just a second later, however, a fist slammed into the armored glass of its lid from inside, sending a net of cracks through it.

…Back in the Academy, in a room identical to the first one, the lights suddenly blinked and then went out. It was now shrouded in absolute darkness.

Something crashed down with a thunderous noise, and then, a pained human voice hissed:

"Damnation!"

A moment later, the lights came back, revealing the figure of a lithe young man with pale skin and dark hair standing near an overturned medical monitor.

There was a disoriented, confused expression on his face.

The lid of the sleeping pod was still closed.

However, it was empty.

…And a few hundred meters away, hidden even deeper underground, there was another room.

This one was slightly bigger, and much better guarded, than all the others.

In it stood a simple sleeping pod.

Beneath its transparent lid, a young woman with ivory skin and long silver hair slept, undisturbed by anything.

Despite the growing commotion outside, inside the tranquil room, it was quiet and peaceful.

Nothing changed.

The pod did not shine with bright lights, the medical equipment remained silent.

Imprisoned in the glass coffin of the sleeping pod, the young woman continued to dream, as if cursed to remain in her nightmares forever.

***

Sunny looked around the small room, slowly realizing where he was.

…Academy. He was back at the Academy.

He had returned to the real world.

He looked around, noticing the medical equipment and the sleeping pod, all of which were currently ablaze with the light of alarms. The pod was still closed.

'How the hell did I get out?'

Speaking of which…

Looking down, Sunny realized that he was naked. To avoid any awkward situations, he summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Once the armor weaved itself out of black strings and covered his skin, he felt a lot better.

…He did, however, have to force himself to not summon the Midnight Shard as well. His instincts screamed, demanding him to arm himself in an unfamiliar environment.

But this was the real world. He had to adjust his behavior.

The decision to cloth himself turned out to be the correct one. Just a few moments after he had made it, the door of the room opened, and a woman in a white coat rushed inside.

Noticing Sunny, she froze. Her eyes widened in horror, and she raised a hand to cover her mouth, as if suppressing a scream.

'What's wrong with her?'

Sunny frowned, blinked a couple of times, then looked at his reflection in one of the medical machines.

'...Oh.'

Since both Sleepers and Awakened traveled to the Dream Realm in spirit, his actual body was whole and pristine, without even a single scar.

However, the same could not be told about the Puppeteer's Shroud.

The silk armor was torn and dirty, looking like rags. What's more, it was covered in so much blood that it was hard to tell that its fabric had once been grey.

Looking at the doctor in embarrassment, Sunny forced out a smile and said in a raspy voice of someone who had not spoken in more than a year:

"Uh… hi? Can I maybe get some clean clothes?"

The woman stared at him for a few moments, then said in a trembling voice:

"Slee… Awakened Sunless? Sir, you are awake?"

'Sir… did she just call me sir?'

Sunny grinned.

"I sure hope so. I've been sleeping for a year and two weeks, after all."

The doctor finally seemed to relax and looked at him with a relieved, happy expression on her face.

A few moments later, she smiled brightly and said, her voice full of sincere joy:

"Welcome back to the real world, sir!"

Chapter-356: Interview with the Shadow

The hospital complex and the administration of the Academy were in complete chaos today. Weeks following the winter solstice were always a busy time for all the people working on the periphery of the Awakened society, since most of the Sleepers who had ventured into the Dream Realm that year usually returned in a span of one to two weeks, very rarely a month.

…Those who had survived, of course.

The sudden Awakening of so many Sleepers who had been gone for years, counted as irrevocably lost, created a shockwave that spread through entire humanity. And people at the Academy were at the epicenter of that storm.

It was a joyous chaos, nevertheless.

In a small office at the surface level of the hospital, a young woman dressed in black slacks and a white blouse was sitting behind a desk, hastily compiling a short report. She had dark-brown hair, neatly tied into a high ponytail, and thick glasses that were constantly sliding down her nose, forcing her to push them back up.

The young woman was one of the administrative workers tasked with the initial debriefing of returning Sleepers. As such, she had seen a lot of incredible things, and heard a lot of incredible stories.

And, sadly, even more heartbreaking ones.

But today was like no other day in her career.

The Sleepers that she was debriefing today were all anomalous, each and every one of them. The things they told her made her blood run

cold, and her imagination fail. She even had an urge to dismiss their reports as false, but knew that it was nearly impossible — the lie detection technology built into the walls of the office would make lying very hard to pull off.

'Incredible… they are incredible, every single one of them…'

To survive for that long in a region of the Dream Realm completely cut off from the rest of the human territory, one populated by Nightmare Creatures much more powerful than any Dreamer could ever become… the achievement of these brave young men and women was truly remarkable.

It filled her with a sense of compassion, pride, and hope.

Humanity received an unexpected, but wonderful gift today.

Finishing the report and sending it to her superior, the young woman pressed a button to let the next Sleeper know that it was their turn to come in.

The door of her office opened, and a pale young man with dark hair entered the office.

Because of the nature of her job, she was accustomed to interacting with incredibly attractive people — almost every Awakened was pleasant to look at, after all. The young man in front of her was far from being the most outstanding in terms of appearance among them, and yet, for some reason, she was unable to look away for a couple of moments, a natural smile somehow finding its way onto her face.

There was something elusive about the young man that attracted attention, almost demanded it.

He was of small height, with a delicate, slender build and perfect white skin. His dark eyes had a humorous, slightly mischievous spark in them. The young man wasn't exactly handsome, but due to his small stature, pale complexion, and dark hair, he looked like a beautiful porcelain doll.

And there was a… a subtle strangeness about him. The young woman couldn't quite put it into words, but it seemed as though his every

move, every word was ever so slightly not exactly how they should have been. Not really wrong, but also not completely right.

This quality was equally as disturbing as it was magnetic. It was the reason why she couldn't stop paying him a bit more attention than to all the other Sleepers she had interviewed today.

The young man smiled and sat down opposite her. In response, her own smile widened a little.

"Good day. My name is Teddy, and I will be your interviewer today, Awakened… uh…"

Of course, she already knew his name. His file was opened on the screen in front of her, containing all the information the Academy had on the pleasant young man. But it was important to create a friendly environment to allow the Sleepers to relax. After their experiences in the Dream Realm, most were tense and on edge.

'Second to last place in the ranking… poor kid, I can't even imagine what horrors he had to survive…'

The young man answered in a pleasant tone:

"Sunless. But people usually call me Sunny. So, uh… Awakened Sunny, I guess? No, that sounds weird. Just call me Sunny."

Teddy nodded, then typed a few words on her pad.

"I will ask you a series of questions about your time in the Dream Realm. The purpose of this briefing is to enrich our base of knowledge about it, as well as let us know how to better assist you in the future. Any little bit of information you can provide might help future Dreamers in their own trials, but you don't have to answer if you don't want to, of course."

Awakened Sunless… Sunny… nodded seriously.

"I understand. I promise to be honest and tell you only the truth. I am a very honest person, you see."

Teddy smiled and asked the first question:

"How long have you spent in the Dream Realm?"

Sunny sighed.

"A year and a few weeks. Although, uh... it felt much longer."

That matched the information in the file.

'This is so terrible. A whole year out there…'

She smiled with encouragement.

"I see. You did very well, Sunny. Very few Dreamers had managed to survive for that long, especially in a region such as the... the Forgotten Shore, right?"

He shivered slightly before answering:

"Yeah. That's what we called it."

Teddy typed a few more words.

"From the interviews with the other Dreamers, we have confirmed that the region of the Dream Realm you were sent to is populated with Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened Rank and above. Can you confirm that information?"

The young man grew a little paler and nodded again.

"Yeah. Awakened, Fallen… Corrupted, too, although those only appeared at night."

Teddy added a couple of lines to her report and asked:

"Have you participated in the battles against such Nightmare Creatures? If so, how many have you killed?"

Sunny was silent for a second, then raised his hand and began counting on his fingers with a thoughtful expression.

"Uh, three or four…"

She began to type and thought:

'Four Awakened creatures. That poor kid looks so weak, and yet he managed to defeat four abominations much more powerful than him, despite being in second to last place of the ranking. Good job, Sunny. You are truly admirable.'

But Sunny didn't finish speaking.

"...hundreds."

Teddy froze, staring at the monitor.

"Excuse me?"

The young man thoughtfully scratched his chin and said:

"Yeah, I think that's right. Around four hundred."

After a long and awkward silence, he asked:

"I am sorry, Teddy, is everything alright?"

She nodded slowly, then forced out a smile.

"...Everything is fine, Sunny. I… I am sorry. We'll have to pause the interview now."

He looked at her with sincere surprise and blinked a couple of times.

"Really? Why?"

She cleared her throat, then answered in a small voice:

"I'm... afraid that I am not qualified to conduct this interview. My… my superior will be with you shortly, Sun… Awakened Sunless. Please wait for a few minutes."

Sunny sighed.

"Oh, well. Alright. It's been nice to meet you."

With that, he gave her a bright smile.

Chapter-357: Risk and Reward

Sunny left the office of the government agents in a strange mood.

The conversation went exactly as he had planned. Even after a higher-ranking specialist had been called in, he managed to steer the interview in the right direction, manipulating both answers and questions to achieve the desired result. In the end, he wanted everyone to know that he was someone exceptional… but not so exceptional as to overshadow the best of the best.

Someone who was in the very highest tier of young Awakened, but also at the very bottom of that tier.

Even though he had kept his most outrageous accomplishments to himself, it felt weird to give away so many secrets about his skill, power level, and achievements. Sunny had grown so used to pretending to be a pathetic clown that removing that mask to reveal another, less outlandish mask was not easy for him.

And yet, it was something he had to do.

After he had Awakened, there was not a single moment for him to properly think things through. He had to go through a series of medical and psychological tests, followed by a lengthy debriefing. However, he had been able to realize one thing very clearly.

His situation had fundamentally changed.

Now that his most important secret was revealed and Nephis had become his master, it was as though a crushing burden had been removed from his chest.

...Replaced by another, even more terrible weight.

In any case, he could finally allow himself to relax a little… for a

while, at least. Not because he trusted her that much, but because she was currently imprisoned in the Dream Realm, unable to enforce her control over him even if she wished to.

In a sense, as far as his worst nightmare becoming reality went, this was the absolute best version of how things could happen.

He had a lot of time to think about countermeasures and prepare for whatever the future held, after all.

Walking through the corridors of the hospital complex, Sunny was engrossed in thought.

One thing he was sure about was that a divine shadow like him could only have one master. So, he didn't have to worry about someone else finding out his True Name and enslaving him, not anymore. The guillotine blade that had hung above his neck all that time was now gone.

However, he still kept the existence of his True Name a secret, for one simple reason — he didn't know what was going to happen if Nephis died.

Would he be free forever? Or die with her?

He felt that neither of these theories was correct. Firstly because the description of the Aspect described him as a divine shadow that had lost its master… which probably meant that he could lose another one and remain alive. Secondly, because the runes of the Shadow Bond had become grey and lifeless, but did not disappear.

Which meant that they might shine with ethereal light once again in the future.

So, the most probable explanation was that he would be safe as long as Nephis remained alive, and if she was killed, anyone would be able to use the True Name against him once again.

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

How long could anyone survive in the decimated remains of the Forgotten Shore? The dark sea was gone, but so was the sun. Most of

the Nightmare Creatures were dead, but the strongest ones survived. It seemed that Changing Star had escaped the collapsing Crimson Spire, at least. What was she going to do now?

Try to cross the Hollow Mountains to reach the human Citadels, or try her luck in the unexplored regions to the north, west, or east? What were the chances of her making it back to the real world alive?

If it was anyone else, Sunny would say that the probability was zero. But it was Nephis, after all. For some reason, he was sure that she would survive, somehow.

So, yes. Even though many things remained unclear, his situation had fundamentally changed.

He was an Awakened now, which meant that there were countless possibilities in front of him. To get access to the best opportunities and the most advantageous treatment, he needed one thing: status.

At this point, continuing to pretend to be a weakling would only be a hindrance. Sunny wanted to reap as many rewards as he could without putting himself at risk. That's why he shifted his usual pattern of behavior and gave the government agents enough information to paint himself as an exceptionally talented Awakened.

Not that he had a lot of choices. Sooner or later, people were going to learn at least some things about his time on the Forgotten Shore and see that a weakling simply would not have survived all that.

Luckily, there was no shortage of exceptionally talented individuals who had Awakened today. On any other day, Sunny's description of his prowess would have made a huge splash. But currently, he was just one of a hundred.

Speaking of that hundred…

Turning a corner, Sunny suddenly found himself in the middle of a small crowd of people. Dozens and dozens of young men and women were standing in the middle of a small hall, most dressed in the simple training clothes provided by the hospital, just like he himself was. On their faces, there was an indescribable kaleidoscope of

emotions: joy, sorrow, worry, anticipation...

Most were looking at a small screen displaying a long list of names.

These were the survivors of the Dreamer Army.

Not everyone was here, of course. Some spent many years on the Forgotten Shore and had been transferred to other facilities by the government or their families. Sunny didn't see Seishan, Kai, or Effie.

…Or Cassie.

His face darkened.

The absence of the first two made sense. Kai was probably being cared for in an expensive VIP care facility, while Seishan had to be kept in the stronghold of her clan. However, he had no idea where the other two were.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then looked at the list of names displayed on the screen.

Before he could read anything, however, someone quickly approached… and hugged him tightly.

'What the…'

Looking up, Sunny saw a vaguely familiar young man holding him in a passionate embrace. A moment later, the young man let go of him and looked down with glistening eyes:

"Sunny! You are here, too!"

Before he could even answer, a somber expression appeared on the young man's face. In a voice that trembled with emotion, he said:

"Thank you! Thank you so much, Sunny. If it wasn't for you and your shadow, we would have never made it to the Gateway."

At the sound of these words, the others turned around. As soon as they saw Sunny, bright smiles ignited on their faces. A hum of voices rose from the crowd:

"Guys! It's Sunny!"

"Thank you, man!"

"We will never forget what you did for us!"

Sunny stared at them, dumbfounded.

'Weird… this is so weird…'

Ever since he had come to his senses near the sleeping pod, mundane humans were treating him with the utmost respect. They even went so far as to use honorifics, calling him "sir" or "Awakened Sunless".

And now this… why was everyone so friendly and happy to see him? He had never experienced anything like this before.

Was this what it was like, to be an Awakened?

After dozens of young people came closer to shake his hand or happily pat him on the shoulder, he awkwardly smiled.

"Uh… it's nice to see you too, guys."

The young woman who was currently facing him smiled in response. Then, however, her face turned dark.

"Have you heard anything about Lady Nephis after coming back?"

He stiffened, then shook his head.

"No. Have… have you?"

She turned back to the screen, tears appearing in her eyes.

"Nothing. None of us did. Out of everyone who made it to the Spire, only two are unaccounted for. She… we think she is still inside."

Sunny remained silent for a while, then asked:

"Who is the second?"

The young woman sighed.

"Sir Caster. No one had seen him near the Gateway. He must have gone to help her hold back the Terror, and… and…"

Her voice trembled.

"...someone said that he died. Oh, gods! What if Lady Nephis dies, too?"

Sunny lingered for a few seconds, a grim expression on his face, then squeezed her shoulder lightly and quietly walked away.

Chapter-358: Shadow Step

The hospital staff had provided each of the newly Awakened with a small room at one of the underground levels of the complex, to have a place to rest and get accustomed to their new abilities while waiting for more permanent accommodations — if they were going to remain at the Academy, of course.

It was also a place they could take their families to talk and spend time together in privacy. Currently, many emotional reunions were taking place in similar rooms around Sunny's, made especially joyous and heartbreaking because the survivors of the Dreamer Army had spent long years on the Forgotten Shore.

They had gone through hell, indeed, but their loved ones in the real world had suffered a great deal as well.

...Not that Sunny would know anything about that. No one had been waiting for him to return, after all.

In any case, the room he had been provided with was sufficiently comfortable. There was an area for training, a desk with a pitcher of water and some snacks, a sofa, and even a bed.

None of the returned were going to sleep, of course. Not for a few days, at least.

At the very end of the field of shimmering runes, Sunny could now see a new string of symbols:

Gateway: —

Usually, the name of the Gateway that an Awakened had last used would be written there. This was their anchor in the Dream Realm.

Every time an Awakened fell asleep, they would be transported to the

Gateway they were anchored to, spend some time in the Dream Realm — either as much as they wanted or as little as possible, only until their soul was ready to travel between worlds once again — and then go through that Gateway to wake up back in reality.

However, the Gateway of the Forgotten Shore had been destroyed. For that reason, every single survivor of the Dreamer Army now had no anchor in the Dream Realm. That didn't mean that they would remain in the waking world forever, though.

Rather, it meant that they were going to be transported to a random one as soon as they fell asleep, just like during their first journey into the land of nightmares. The prospect of being at the mercy of the Spell once more was nothing short of terrifying.

Especially for Sunny, who had the misfortune of always finding himself in only the most extreme of circumstances.

However, the situation wasn't really that bad.

There was a way for a newly Awakened to change their anchor without relying on chance. It was to acquire the services of a Saint, who would be able to take them to the Dream Realm without involving the Spell, appearing near the Saint's own anchor.

Of course, that anchor would most likely be situated in one of the human Citadels, allowing the Awakened to anchor themselves to a Gateway in human territory.

There were just a few dozen Saints alive across all of humanity, so for an average Awakened, their help was not easy to get.

However, Sunny was not an average Awakened. In fact, none of the survivors of the Dreamer Army were.

Every year, the most promising of the newly Awakened were recruited by powerful Citadels and provided the means to anchor themselves to their Gateways.

Everyone profited from this arrangement — the talented Awakened received a chance to change their anchor if they wished to do so, while Citadels received new powerful defenders or useful craftsmen

to enhance their living conditions and infrastructure.

With how extraordinary the hundred survivors of the Forgotten Shore were, and how unusual their circumstances turned out to be, there was going to be a small recruitment war happening in the next few days. Prosperous Citadels were going to fight for the right to add these outstanding young people to their populations, promising better and bigger rewards, as if during an auction.

The government would inevitably get involved, too, helping those who for some reason failed to find a Citadel to call home.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army just had to remain awake long enough to make a choice and settle the details of their future anchors. Since their physique was far superior to that of mundane humans, they didn't have to sleep every day, so two or three were not going to be a problem.

…Sunny had a lot to do in these few days.

The first thing he had turned his attention to after retreating to his personal room was test the limits of Shadow Step.

The result of these tests left him pleasantly surprised.

Just like he had suspected, the ability to travel between shadows was akin to a weird form of teleportation. He could enter a shadow that was large enough to encompass his body and instantly appear from another.

The distance of that jump, however, was not too large. Currently, it was even smaller than the range of his Shadow Sense, around a dozen meters or so. However, he knew that it would increase as he absorbed more shadow fragments, just like the range of Shadow Control had increased back on the Forgotten Shore.

There was an exclusion from that rule, too.

He was able to travel between his own shadows no matter how far apart they were.

By now, he could control his shadows from as much as a couple of

kilometers away. That meant that, if both were sent into opposite directions and reached the limit of the Shadow Control range, he could potentially instantly cover about four kilometers of distance in less than a second.

And that was just one side of Shadow Step. The other was, arguably, even more miraculous and unexpected.

Before, Sunny could move through shadows as though he was one of them, becoming practically undetectable.

But now, he could literally become a part of the shadows, diving into them and becoming incorporeal. Not only did it make him completely undetectable by means of sight, hearing, and smell, but it also allowed him to move with incredible speed through any uninterrupted shadow, no matter how long and vast it was.

In that state, he was invulnerable to physical attacks, but also unable to perform physical attacks of his own.

It also felt very strange. Sort of... peaceful. Sunny had to constantly remind himself to concentrate and not forget what he was doing.

That ability would become truly incredible at night or in the depths of some terrible cave system, like the one they had traveled through on their expedition to the Hollow Mountains.

In short, Shadow Step was incredible.

However, it came at a price.

Unlike Shadow Control, which was as natural to Sunny as breathing, using Shadow Step required him to expend essence. The more distance he covered with a jump and the more time he spent as an incorporeal shadow, the more essence he would have to consume.

Sunny suspected that the theoretical four-kilometer jump would eat through all of his essence, leaving both of his cores dry as a desert.

Spending essence was not the same as spending shadow fragments, of course. His soul always slowly generated essence, eventually filling his cores to their maximum capacity, while shadow fragments

increased that maximum capacity and were used to create new cores, as well as turn Echoes into Shadows.

Still, he also needed essence to fight effectively and use the more powerful enchantments of higher rank Memories, so balancing its expenditure was an intricate task.

Truly, becoming an Awakened had opened a whole new layer of both incredible opportunities and insidious problems. It was a lot to take in.

…But he was going to get there, eventually.

Sitting on the floor of his temporary quarters, Sunny sighed and summoned the runes.

Finally, it was time to reap his reward.

He had worked so much, and done so much, to get here. First, repeating the same sword strike thousands of times, day after day, until his hands bled and his muscles screamed from the pain. Learning the basic katas and movements of Neph's flowing battle style, then gaining enough insight into it to make it his own.

Almost dying to receive the gift of clarity, then fighting against the Shadow Saint and slowly incorporating her grounded technique into his.

Studying the movements of his shadow to catch the slight difference in how it held itself, then spending countless hours trying to decipher the hidden meaning behind it, until his mind was ready to boil. Solving that mystery and traveling into the past to observe the birth of the nameless temple slave, and the beautiful dance of his mother.

And then, torturous practice and arduous process of turning his vision of the elusive and wonderful battle art into reality.

Only to finally succeed in the middle of the furious, bloody battle against Nephis.

Of all his achievements, this was perhaps the one he was proud of the most.

Because Shadow Dance was entirely his. It was something he created out of almost nothing, something that bore and expressed his individuality.

Sunny had never received any type of inheritance, so this legacy, which was created by himself and for himself, held a special place in his heart.

...Looking at the shimmering runes, he read:

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [1/7].

First Relic: [Claim].

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic: Unearned…

Holding his breath, he concentrated on the runes describing the first relic and whispered:

"Claim."

As Sunny watched, the runes glowed brightly for a few seconds, and then changed.

First Relic: Claimed.

And a moment later, the Spell spoke softly into his ear:

[You have received an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

[You have received a Shadow: Soul Serpent.]

Chapter-359: Soul Serpent

Sunny stared at the runes for a while, then slightly tilted his head.

'A Shadow…'

What an unexpected boon.

Usually, a Legacy Relic came in the form of a Memory, or very rarely an Echo. Perhaps there were some other types of Relics out there, but he had never heard of them.

That didn't mean much, though. By now, Sunny was reasonably certain that there were a lot of things that he, as well as the rest of mundane humans, had never heard about. Awakened kept a lot of secrets.

Nevertheless, receiving a Shadow pleasantly surprised him.

Looking up, he saw new runes appearing out of thin air:

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Soul Serpent].

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then furtively looked around. The small room was empty and quiet.

Feeling a little bit stupid, Sunny shook his head and summoned his new Shadow to take a good look at it.

A slight breeze moved his hair, and in the next second…

Nothing happened.

'Huh?'

Sunny frowned and looked around the room, then scratched the back of his head.

'What the hell? Where is the damn snake?'

He had hoped to see a giant serpent made out of shadows appear in front of him, with black scales as thick as plate armor and a mouth wide enough to swallow his enemies whole. Or an average-sized snake, at least!

But there was nothing.

He even checked to see if a new shadow joined his two invaluable helpers, but no. Both rested on the floor, one seemingly content, the other bored and in a perpetually bad mood.

'Weird…'

He raised a hand to rub his eyes, but froze at the last moment.

"What is that?"

There was something dark on the skin of his wrist, peaking out slightly from beneath the sleeve.

Following intuition, Sunny hastily stood up and took off the top of the training suit provided to him by the staff of the hospital complex. Left naked to the waist, he then looked at himself through the eyes of the shadow.

'...Huh?!'

Out there on his pale skin, an intricate image of a black serpent was tattooed, so detailed that it almost seemed alive. The serpent coiled around his arms and his torso, its tail resting just above his right hand, its head just above his left.

"...What? I have… a tattoo now?'

In the darkness of the small room, the serpent almost seemed to move under his skin, two curved fangs threatening to break its surface. It was striking, beautiful, and disturbing.

Of course, Sunny recognized the serpent immediately. Both the nameless temple slave and his mother had a very similar image

marking their skin, after all.

It was the Shadow God's mark.

But why did his new Shadow turn into a tattoo?

Confused, Sunny listened to his body and soul, trying to feel if something had changed about them.

And soon, he did notice a small difference.

The flow of the shadow essence through his body had changed. If previously it had circulated naturally, now, it seemed to follow the coils of the serpent, moving faster and with more intent, as if directed by them.

'Soul Serpent… does that thing enhance my shadow essence control?'

To experiment, Sunny poured essence into his limbs and then performed several movements of Shadow Dance. After that, he jumped from one shadow to another a few times, expending even more essence.

He felt the difference instantly. Not only was he able to control the essence better, but it also seemed to be consumed at a slightly slower pace, and restore at a faster one.

Soul Serpent served as a channel for it, existing both on the material and the spiritual plane. As such, it was connected both to his cores and to his body, creating a strange bridge that allowed Sunny to use his shadow essence with better efficiency.

'This is… a very useful Shadow.'

Those words were an egregious understatement. Sunny had already understood how important and vital managing essence was for the Awakened — any tool that could enhance that aspect of their power was truly precious.

And he got such a marvelous one, practically for free.

He was also sure that the Serpent would only get more powerful in

the future, provided he kept it well-fed, of course.

…But how was he supposed to feed Memories to a tattoo?

Perplexed, Sunny thought for a bit, then finally concentrated on the runes once again.

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Dormant.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon].

Shadow Description: [When the end came, Shadow was the last of the gods to be destroyed. Many have resented him for creating death, but in the end, death embraced all.]

Noting the interesting detail of a connection between Shadow God and death, Sunny lowered his gaze.

However, the last string, the one he had been accustomed to paying the most attention to when it came to Saint, was missing. There was no indication of how many shadow fragments it would take to make the Serpent evolve.

Sunny frowned.

Come to think of it…

That strange Shadow was clearly connected to his soul. Perhaps it wasn't a coincidence that it was a monster — Sunny was a monster himself, after all. So, maybe, the Serpent would not evolve its Class like Saint had, by consuming the soul core of a suitable Nightmare Creature. Most likely, it would grow alongside Sunny himself.

But why was it of the Dormant Rank, while Sunny had already become an Awakened?

'Huh…'

Maybe… maybe its Rank was not tied to Sunny's soul, but to his comprehension of the Shadow Dance? Currently, he had mastered only the first of the seven steps of the battle art, and the Serpent belonged to the first of the seven Ranks. Would it evolve to a higher Rank if he mastered more steps?

Full of thoughts, Sunny sighed and turned his attention to the Shadow's Attributes.

[Shadow Guide] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent guides shadow essence as it flows through your body."

[Soul Weapon] Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent can assume the form of a weapon."

'The form of a wea… wait, what?'

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then stared at his left wrist, where the head of the Soul Serpent was drawn under his skin. Its scales were so intricate that it almost seemed as if the creature was moving.

Now… it really was moving.

Following Sunny's mental command, the Soul Serpent slithered up to his hand, and then escaped from it, turning into a dark blade. As the coils moved across his body, the blade grew longer and longer, until a hilt wrapped in black leather rested comfortably in his grip.

The tattoo was gone.

Sunny found himself holding a lusterless greatsword. It was a menacing, formidable, foreboding odachi.

Including the hilt, the odachi was as long as he was tall. It was surprisingly light for its length, but heavy enough to inflict truly devastating wounds.

Almost invisible on the dark steel, a lifelike image of a coiling serpent was etched into its blade.

He weighed the greatsword in his hands for a while, then smiled darkly.

'...Truly, this is a weapon worthy of a shadow.'

It was still weak, though. If it was a Memory, it would have been only a Dormant one of the second tier. Sunny was going to have to put in some work to make the dark odachi really fearsome.

With a sigh, he commanded the Serpent to slither back onto his body, and then to disappear entirely. A few seconds later, his skin was clean and empty once again.

'What a bountiful harvest I had today.'

Sunny stared at the darkness for a few minutes, then sighed heavily.

It was time to do something that he had dreaded doing ever since returning to the real world.

He couldn't put it off any longer.

Chapter-360: Broken

In a heavily guarded underground room, a young woman with silver hair was sleeping in a transparent machine that kept her body alive. Her face was pale and thin, painted by the ghostly glow of machine lights and deep, angular shadows.

The room was peaceful and silent, the hum of machinery creating low background noise. From time to time, a piece of medical equipment produced a sound and grew quiet again.

A blind girl with piercing blue eyes stood quietly near the sleeping pod, an empty expression written in the delicate lines of her beautiful face. If it wasn't for the fact that her hand rested on the hilt of an elegant rapier, a person would easily mistake her for one of the Hollows that were cared for on another level of the hospital complex.

The door of the room did not open, however, there was suddenly another presence inside. A young man with pale skin and dark, cruel eyes appeared out of the shadows and walked over to stand on the opposite side of the sleeping pod. His steps were soft and quiet.

He lingered for a while, then looked down, at the young woman sleeping beneath the glass lid of the mechanical coffin.

For a second, his face became contorted by a terrible grimace. Grief, anger, fear, and longing mixed in his eyes, then disappeared, hidden behind a mask of cold indifference.

Sunny stared at Nephis for a long time, trying to get his emotions under control. He knew that seeing her like this, weak and helpless, would affect him. But he didn't know just how much it was going hurt him.

…He also had not anticipated how dark the thoughts entering his mind would be.

'...I can kill her right now. One strike of the Moonlight Shard, and I'll be free again.'

But no, he couldn't.

Firstly, because there was no guarantee that Nephis would die if her body was destroyed. Just like there were Hollows, people whose souls had been destroyed while leaving an empty body behind, there were Lost — people whose bodies in the real world had died, leaving their souls wandering the Dream Realm.

He suspected that this was the reason why the people who wanted Changing Star dead had sent Caster to kill her in the Dream Realm instead of infiltrating the Academy.

And secondly, and maybe more importantly… he simply could not bring himself to harm Nephis. Not again, not anymore, and not… not like this.

'Cassie, on the other hand…'

With a dark grimace, Sunny slowly moved his gaze to the blind girl.

As if noticing it, she turned slightly and said:

"Hello, Sunny."

He stared at her, his eyes burning with fury.

"What, you can see now?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then shook her head.

"No. But… something like that."

A wild grin appeared on his face.

"Congratulations. Really, good for you! You won't be useless anymore, at least."

He knew that his words were going to hurt her, and was glad to say them for that reason.

The blind girl didn't react, and just continued staring into the emptiness, her eyes cold and distant. But he wasn't fooled. He knew her well enough to recognize the ocean of pain hiding behind that coldness.

'Good… suffer! You deserve this!'

Sunny opened his mouth, wishing to accuse her, but then forced himself to stop. He had to keep himself under control...

Swallowing his angry words, Sunny gritted his teeth and spat:

"How? How did you even know?!"

Cassie hesitated for a bit, then answered quietly:

"When you killed that spy from the Castle. You said it out loud then. I saw it… in a vision. After that, the rest was not impossible to figure out."

His eyes widened.

Sunny remained silent for a long time, trying to deal with the shock that her words had caused him.

'Harper… when I killed Harper?'

The memory of that horrible day sent a shudder through his soul. He remembered it so vividly… the blood streaming down his hands as he held the pitiful young man down, murdering him, giving in to the agony of the Flaw.

And whispering in a hoarse, barely audible voice:

"Lost from Light! I am… Lost… Lost from Light…"

Standing in the underground room of the hospital complex, Sunny wanted to both laugh and cry.

'So this is it… this was what did me in… one mistake, I only made one mistake, and it was all it took to undo me!'

It was almost as if Harper had managed to avenge himself from beyond the grave. Well… he had never gotten a grave, really. Sunny just dumped his body in the ruins, for the Nightmare Creatures to feast on.

A lot of good it did him, in the end.

Piercing the blind girl with a burning look, he said through gritted teeth:

"So that was why you were waiting for me back then, why you gave me the Eternal Spring? You were… you were ready to say goodbye. You knew?"

Cassie slowly faced him, then said in a steady, even tone:

"Yes. I did."

Sunny looked down, clenching his fists.

"You knew... if you knew… then why didn't you try to change anything?! Why, curse you?!"

Cassie stared at him, her calm expression finally collapsing. Pain, sorrow, and anger contorted her face, and with a voice so hurt that it almost sounded as if she was bleeding, she answered:

"Didn't try?! Of course, I tried! I tried everything I could to make the future I saw change! But no matter how much I tried, it never did. It always remained the same! Even worse, my attempts only made it...

appear even more inevitable..."

Turning away, she gritted her teeth and remained silent for a while, her hands trembling.

"I… I… I was the first one to understand what my vision of the Crimson Spire meant. Shadows devouring a dying angel… I understood it on that very day."

Cassie closed her eyes for a moment, then spoke again, her voice quiet.

"Don't you remember? I even asked you to promise to always protect her. And what did you say?"

Sunny stared at her, remembering. Yes, at the very start, there had been a conversation like that.

"...No. I said no."

A fragile smile appeared on Cassie's face.

"Yes. You said no. And on that day, I knew that I had to make a choice. And I made it. I chose Neph."

She shivered and hugged herself, as if dying of cold.

"I had to betray one of my best friends to save the other. And I did. I chose to sacrifice you to save Neph. Of course, I fooled myself for a while, telling myself that nothing bad would happen. That if I help Neph, maybe both of you would survive. But deep down, I knew that it was just one of the possible outcomes, so what was the difference?

I betrayed you. And you know what?"

A small, bitter laugh escaped from her lips.

"It was for nothing. I betrayed my best friend, and nothing still changed. I sacrificed you, but couldn't save anyone. Despite it all, I couldn't… couldn't change fate."

Sunny stared at her for a while, then snarled:

"...That's it? That's your speech? That's what you have to say for yourself? What do you want me to do, pity you?"

A furious gleam appeared in his eyes.

"After everything I have done for you, after I saved your life countless times, took care of you as if you were my sister, this is how you chose to repay me? By giving my biggest secret to Neph, so that she could use it against me when the time came?"

Cassie remained silent, not saying anything.

"Do you even know what you've done?! Do you even know what you've taken from me?!"

She hesitated for a bit, than answered quietly:

"I didn't know why, or how my vision would come true. I only knew that it would happen in the Spire. So I gave your secret to Nephis, hoping that she would survive thanks to it."

Sunny laughed, then grew quiet.

An oppressive silence settled between them, and remained unbroken for several minutes.

After a while, he finally said:

"...I can understand. Rationally, I do. You were forced to make a terrible decision, with both choices being a betrayal. And you chose to help Neph, who was with you first. Who saved you when I would have just left you to die."

But then, a cold gleam appeared in his eyes.

"But that doesn't mean that I can forgive it. You go to hell, Cassie. Go to hell and die there, for all I care. I hope that I will never see you again."

With that, Sunny turned around to leave, but then stopped.

He couldn't help but be cruel to her one last time.

"Oh, and that secret? It was the reason why she got stuck there all alone. So, in a sense, you have doomed both of your friends."

As he spoke those words, Cassie flinched.

A satisfied, vindictive smile appeared on Sunny's face.

...But why did it hurt him so much to say those words?

"So, congratulations. You've made it back, Cassie. Go back home, spend time with your family. Didn't you tell me that your mother

makes the best eggs? Eat your fill. Try to enjoy them, knowing what you did."

As the blind girl paled and turned away with a broken expression on her face, he smiled bitterly and dissolved into the shadows.

Bonds of friendship were such a fragile thing.

They were so hard to create, but so easy to break.

All it took was a moment...

Chapter-361: Making Plans

Sitting with his back against the door of his room, Sunny stared ahead, his heart empty.

He had lived most of his life alone. One year ago, he had entered the Dream Realm alone. And now, he was alone once again.

But not having something was very different from losing it. Now that he knew how precious true friendship and affection were, existing without them felt like torture. It felt like there was a bleeding wound on his soul, left there after he had so cruelly severed the tether connecting him to Cassie.

One of the very few people he cared for in this world…

Hurting her felt good and justified, but instead of relief, it only brought him more pain.

Nevertheless, he did not regret what he had done. Sometimes one had to endure suffering.

Sometimes, pain was necessary.

Now, Sunny was completely alone. So was Cassie.

And somewhere in the Dream Realm, Nephis was alone, too.

The three of them had done the impossible, but paid a heavy price for it.

'What a fiasco.'

Who would have thought that one day, he would not only escape the Forgotten Shore, but also become vastly more powerful than he had ever dreamed… only to sit on the floor in a dark room, feeling miserable?

With a resentful grimace, Sunny shook his head and sighed.

'Enough of wallowing in self-pity.'

He had a lot of things to do. A lot of plans to make. The horrors of the Forgotten Shore were now behind him, but new threats already loomed in the distance.

Firstly, he was now at the mercy of another person. Despite the fact that his master was lost in another world with very low chances of ever making it back, Sunny felt that they were fated to meet again.

He didn't know how to feel about that. Or rather, he both desperately longed for Nephis to return and wished that she died. His emotions for her were intense, overwhelming, and an absolute mess.

Despite all that, Sunny didn't think that she would die.

Somehow, he was sure that Nephis would not perish in the Dream Realm and eventually make it back. Maybe in a few months, maybe in a few years, but she would achieve the impossible once again and return to the real world.

The question was… how? Would she travel to the human territory through the Hollow Mountains, or head in another direction? They didn't know much about what surrounded the Forgotten Shore from the east, west, and north. He doubted that those places were better than the horrifying, misty mountains, though.

That doubt was based on one simple fact: there was no information about them, which meant that no human had ever returned from those regions of the Dream Realm to tell the tale.

Although deadly, Hollow Mountains were at least known to mankind. Chances were, Changing Star would choose to try her luck there instead of venturing into the unknown.

Nothing was more dangerous than that which you knew nothing about, after all.

'Unknown…'

Sunny frowned.

That was another problem he had to face… or rather, an opportunity he would potentially be able to exploit. Due to his [Fated] Attribute, Sunny had stumbled onto the legacy of a creature named Weaver and got a glimpse into the secrets of the gods.

What he saw there left him both terrified and breathless.

There was a boundless mystery hiding in the ruined land of dreams and nightmares, a tapestry that connected the dead gods, the Unknown, the daemons, and the Nightmare Spell together. The former rulers of the Dream Realm were gone, but the Spell remained, and humanity — including Sunny himself — had now become an unwilling part of that tapestry through it.

Sunny's most ardent desire was to control his own fate, and he couldn't achieve it without knowledge. Now that he knew what to look for, he had to deepen his understanding of the fate of the gods and the origins of the Spell. Who knew, maybe that was where the keys to his freedom were hidden.

…And then, there were the Sovereigns.

His face grew dark.

'Honestly, why is everything so complicated…'

Why couldn't he just open a Memory Store, become wealthy and fat, and live peacefully ever after?

That was his plan all along. However, the recent revelations made Sunny doubt the validity of such plans.

Judging from what Caster had said, there were some figures hiding in the shadows, ruling over the human world. And not only were they there, but Sunny was also, apparently, unwillingly doing their bidding.

He still remembered the warning Nephis had given him once. She told them that there were words that could get him killed simply if he learned of their existence.

Well… now he knew a lot of those words.

Sovereigns, Domains, Lineage Memories…

Was he going to pretend to know nothing and hope that those powerful beings would not turn their gaze to him one day, or was he going to do something to prepare for the day they do?

Did he even have a choice, knowing what he did, with his fate hopelessly entangled with that of Changing Star… who was embroiled in these clandestine machinations just by virtue of her birth?

'So bothersome…'

What was he supposed to do? What was the plan of action?

Sunny sighed.

Well, it was simple, really.

Learn as much as he can about the Sovereigns, but in a way that would never lead back to him.

Explore the past of the Dream Realm to gain insight into the daemons, the gods, and the Unknown.

But first and foremost, grow stronger.

Much, much stronger.

When Nephis returned, he had to be ready for the worst. Sunny didn't really think that Changing Star he knew would abuse her power over him… in fact, he was almost sure that she wouldn't. Not only because of the bond between them, but also because in Neph's warped mind, doing so would simply be beneath her.

However, he wasn't going to let this sweet hope prevent him from creating contingencies.

If she ever decided to truly make him a slave, one of them was going to die.

Standing up, Sunny walked over to the desk and wrote on a piece of synthetic paper:

[0/2000].

Then, he summoned the runes, glanced at them, and added a second string of numbers:

[2749/3000].

However, the runes shimmered and changed before he was done writing. The number of soul essence grew bigger.

Sunny stared at the runes for a few seconds, then corrected the number.

Then, he put the pen down and looked at the piece of paper in front of him:

[0/2000] < [2773/3000].

"Alright."

So, this was it.

This was the plan.

From now on, this was his life's goal.

Chapter-362: Breakfast Invitation

The initial series of tests, the interview with the government specialists, the somber conversation with Cassie, and the hours Sunny had spent pondering about his past, present, and future took up almost an entire day.

A new dawn was already bathing the world in soft sunlight, which Sunny knew because one of the walls in his underground room was made into a false window, with a vista of one of the parks in the Academy being projected onto it from a remote camera.

He was experiencing mild mental fatigue, but was not sleepy at all, at least not yet. Truly, the physique of an Awakened was much more resilient than that of a mundane human.

There were still a few things he had to do. In all the turmoil of the past twenty-four hours, he had not gotten a chance to take a proper look at his Memories, for example…

Sunny was about to summon the runes when, suddenly, there was a knock on his door. He flinched.

'...What? Who could it be?'

For a moment, a mental picture of Effie and Kai appeared in his mind, but then he dismissed it. The two of them must have been as busy after their Awakening as he was. Much more, most likely, considering that they probably had friends and families to deal with, too, on top of everything else.

With them being in different facilities, coming to the Academy just to pay him a visit was not a likely scenario.

Certainly not that soon.

Hiding one of the shadows on his body to appear like a normal person, Sunny walked to the door and opened it.

Standing there was a striking, confident woman in her late twenties.

Immediately, it seemed as though the temperature inside of the room dropped by a couple of degrees.

She had short, raven-black hair and icy blue eyes. Her flawless skin was smooth, supple and as white as snow. The woman was dressed in a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and black leather boots. The jacket of the uniform was casually unbuttoned, revealing a tanktop that was currently drawn taut against her full…

'Crap!'

"...What are you staring at, Awakened Sunless?"

Sunny looked up with wide eyes.

"Master Jet! I was just… uh… appreciating your fashion sense."

Indeed, it was Soul Reaper Jet — the Ascended who worked for the government and had welcomed him back to the real world after the First Nightmare.

Sunny had sometimes thought about this beautiful woman during his journey into the Dream Realm. Not only because the three pieces of advice Master Jet had given him ended up saving his life on multiple occasions, but also because she was from the outskirts, just like him.

Knowing that someone as unfortunate as that had managed to not only survive, but even thrive in the ruthless reality of the Nightmare Spell had given fuel to his determination, as well as providing vital perspective.

…But what was she doing at his door?

Sunny studied Master Jet, suddenly full of doubt.

She looked exactly as she had a year ago, the only difference being that her uniform had more wrinkles, and there were now dark circles under her eyes.

As he watched, she grinned.

"My fashion sense? Why, thank you! If you want, I can introduce you to my tailors. You will have to sign a few thick contracts to receive a comfy suit such as this, though."

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Ah, I see. Those tailors are slightly out of my price range, I'm afraid. But thanks for the offer."

After a short pause, he cautiously asked:

"Uhm, Master Jet? It is very nice to see you again, but… to what do I owe the pleasure? I am sure that you are too busy to visit every random returnee."

She looked at him for a couple of seconds, then suddenly yawned and shook her head to chase away sleepiness.

"...Correct. But since there's some procedure you still have to go through and we already know each other, I thought that I'd do the honors."

With that, she looked around the deserted corridor of the hospital complex with a dubious expression, lingered for a couple of seconds, and then asked:

"Wanna eat?"

***

Some time later, the two of them were walking through the ground level of the Academy hospital. Sunny had thought that Master Jet would take him to the cafeteria there, but instead, she headed toward the exit.

"Uh… where are we going? I thought that cafeteria was this way?"

She looked at him with confusion, then grimaced slightly.

"Hospital food? No thanks. Let me take you to the Instructors Lounge. That's where they keep the really good stuff."

Sunny coughed.

"But, Master Jet… you're not an instructor?"

She smiled, then pointed to the three-star insignia on her left sleeve.

"Technically, I'm not. But the Academy is a government facility, so I outrank most of the people here. What are they going to do?"

He blinked a couple of times, then shrugged.

Indeed, what are they going to do? Tell a Master to get out? Who would be that suicidal?

As they exited the hospital complex and walked across the Academy grounds, Sunny couldn't help but throw furtive glances at the confident young woman. Not because he was mesmerized by her, but because seeing her again was a strange experience.

Back when they first met, he was just fresh from the First Nightmare, barely accustomed to his new status as a Sleeper. Being in the presence of a Master was like standing in front of a legend. He remembered vividly how much fear and awe this beautiful stranger inspired in him.

How acutely he felt the measure of ease with which she would be able to kill him, if she wished. All it would take was a flick of her finger.

Now, slightly more than a year later, so much had changed. He was still pretty sure that he had no chance of taking her in a fight, a fair one at least, but the reverent fear was gone, replaced by simple respect. Sunny knew that he had it in himself to if not win, then at least survive a confrontation with someone like Jet.

In a sense, he was now half a legend himself.

As he thought about how different things had become, the two of them approached a small, picturesque building near the center of the Academy.

Without slowing down, Master Jet walked past a few people that were staring at her with a strange mix of regard and disdain, and entered the Instructors Lodge.

'Oh, right… I remember Teacher Julius mentioning that she has a terrible reputation. To be exact, he described her as a "murderous savage", "barbarian", "having a problematic personality", and "psychopathic killer". Uh…'

No wonder people were giving them weird looks throughout the whole walk.

For some reason, Sunny suddenly felt annoyed. Maybe because Jet was someone he knew, or maybe because she used to be an outskirt rat just like him, but he found himself feeling… protective.

'Stare away, bastards… see if we give a damn.'

Master Jet clearly didn't, so why would he?

Sunny looked at the next person to give her a dirty glance coldly, activating the murder math to its fullest potential. Immediately, the onlooker paled slightly and turned away.

Sunny smiled.

'That's right, look away. Now... the most important part. Let's see what the Instructors eat!'

Chapter-363: Citizen Sunny

At first glance, the interior of the Instructors Lounge seemed simple and cozy. Most of the furniture was made out of wood, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Bright sunlight streamed through the tall windows, which were open slightly to let in the chilly winter air.

However, his eyes widened slightly when Sunny realized that all the wood around him was natural, not synthetic.

'Extravagant! Wasteful!'

Noticing his expression, Master Jet smiled slightly.

"Let me guess, you have never seen that much real wood in one place?"

Sunny hesitated, then gave her a nod.

"Only in the Dream Realm…"

The young woman grinned, moved a chair back with her foot, and sat down at one of the tables.

"Where do you think all this came from?"

He looked around, seeing the Instructors Lounge of the Academy from a completely new perspective, then silently sat down, lost for words.

Master Jet summoned the menu, made a selection, then leaned back and tiredly rubbed her face.

"Believe it or not, the chair you're sitting on is made out of a dead titan."

Sunny stared at her, shocked. Suddenly, he had a strong impulse to jump out of the chair.

"...What?"

She chuckled and gestured around:

"All of this, actually. Back when Bastion was first established, it was surrounded by a vast — and very hungry — forest. The whole thing was one giant Nightmare Creature. Clan Valor spent decades at war with it, losing many knights. In the end, the forest was destroyed, leaving behind a lot of high-quality lumber. And here we are."

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then cautiously knocked on the wooden table. The thing seemed dead, but he decided to remain alert, just in case.

...It had once been a part of a titan, after all!

Soon, their food arrived. Sunny half-expected for it to be delivered by an actual Echo, but luckily, it was brought by a mundane automated server.

Taking his plates off the motorized tray, Sunny stared at the feast in front of him with wild eyes. There were fried potatoes, baked beans, juicy roasted meat, a salad made out of real vegetables, a bowl of fragrant soup, several pieces of oven bread, butter, jam, and even chocolate pudding for dessert.

It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

It was also his first time seeing some of these things in real life. Suddenly, the position of a research assistant once promised to him by Teacher Julius did not seem so unattractive.

"Uh… please excuse me…"

Master Jet waved at him and concentrated on her own food. Not wasting any time on manners, Sunny assaulted his breakfast with the same level of ferocity as when battling Nightmare Creatures.

…Some time later, with his belly on the verge to bursting open, he

pushed away empty plates and leaned back with a satisfied smile on his face.

'Ah… this is life!'

Master Jet glanced at him with a dry smile.

"What did I tell you? This is where they hide the good stuff."

Sunny looked at the empty plates with regret and sighed.

"Yeah. Although after a year of eating almost nothing except for monster meat, I would have been satisfied even by synth paste."

Her smile dimmed at the mention of the most common food in the outskirts.

As two glasses of beautiful dark tea steamed in front of them, Master Jet sighed, then took out something from the inner pocket of her uniform. It was a small metal box with a sensor on its lid.

Placing the box on the table, she looked at Sunny and asked:

"You must be wondering why I visited you, right?"

Sunny tilted his head slightly, stared at the metal box for a few seconds, and then answered in a cautious tone:

"...Yes. To be honest, I am very curious."

She nodded, then smiled reassuringly.

"Don't be nervous. It's just a formality, and a very beneficial one, at that. Put your finger on the sensor."

He hesitated, then did as she had told. The sensor buzzed for half a minute, and then a small green light ignited on the metal box. With a quiet click, it unlocked.

Master Jet opened the box and took out several objects — a slick communicator made out of flexible glass, a memory chip with the government seal etched on its surface, and a small iron badge with

two stars engraved into it.

Pushing them toward Sunny, she lingered for a moment, and then said in a light tone:

"Congratulations, Awakened Sunless. You are now officially a citizen. Of the seventh rank, no less."

Her words struck Sunny like a hammer. Silent, he stared at the three objects in front of him, his face not betraying even a hint of emotion.

A citizen…

Back in the outskirts, people lived and died dreaming of becoming one of the true citizens. That simple word hid so much meaning. Access to proper food, human rights, and better life. To all the things that none of them really had.

To having a future.

Very few of these people had ever gotten the chance to hear the word "citizen" in connection to their name. Being poor and lowly only led to becoming destitute and falling to the bottom. It rarely led to rising higher, let alone soaring to the peak.

And here he was, not only becoming a citizen, but even jumping over all the steps and arriving at the very pinnacle of the social hierarchy in one go. Not just a citizen and not even one of high rank, but of the highest.

'Seventh rank… there's literally nothing higher.'

Finally, his expression changed, becoming grim. Looking up at Master Jet, he asked in a somber tone:

"I get it that I would be made a citizen after Awakening. But… seventh rank? Isn't that a little too much?"

Master Jet laughed.

"Sunless… you don't really know what you did, do you?"

Sunny looked at her without humor, then said:

"I'm pretty sure that I do, but please, enlighten me."

She shook her head and sighed.

"Listen… of all the Sleepers that had returned from the Dream Realm in the last few years, there are only five whose files were marked as SS. And you are one of them."

Chapter-364: SS Class Awakened Sunless

Sunny stared at Master Jet, a strange expression frozen on his face. After a while, he asked:

"...That's great, but... what the hell does "SS" mean?"

She smiled and sipped her tea, looking at him across the table. Placing the cup back down, she then shook her head slightly and said:

"The government — and the powerful Legacy clans, of course — keeps track of every Awakened in the world. That shouldn't be a surprise for you, right?"

Sunny slowly nodded.

"Yeah, that makes sense."

Master Jet shifted slightly, then continued:

"Firstly, because every Awakened technically has a duty to respond when a Gate opens near their location — that's what the special communicator is for. In exchange for all the privileges we receive, we have to protect this world from the Nightmare Creatures."

A dark grimace appeared on her face.

"Of course, realistically, no one can force you to actually fulfill that duty, or at least no one is going to. Many Awakened turn around and run as soon as they receive a Gate Crisis alert."

Sunny grimaced. On one hand, he understood such a reaction perfectly. Why would they want to risk their lives for random

strangers? Not every Awakened was good in a fight, too. Not everyone was like the Artisans of the Dark City, who had gone into battle side by side with those Dreamers who possessed combat Aspects.

...But on the other hand, the idea of running away while monsters were devouring mundane humans and wreaking havoc in the real world simply rubbed him the wrong way. It seemed as though Sunny had somehow developed a bit of pride in the past year. He didn't want to run from the Nightmare Creatures and capitulate to the Spell. He might have even been infected with having morals…

'Better squish this lunacy fast...'

Oblivious to his thoughts, Master Jet continued:

"Secondly, newly Awakened are monitored because everyone wants to recruit the best of them. Talents need to be nurtured, and for that, they need to be recognized first. So the most promising Awakened receive a mark on their file. Usually, it's SA, or simply S. Do you know what that means?"

Sunny shook his head.

She grinned:

"SA means "strategic asset". There's not a lot of Awakened who are considered to be important enough to be assigned that designation. Having one means that you are viewed as a person who can potentially be important to the very survival of humanity, or at least make an impact on the global scale.

Simply put, it's either someone whose Aspect can be extremely useful to society or someone who has a high chance of becoming a Master, maybe even a Saint."

Master Jet took another sip of tea, then gestured lazily at herself.

"Like me. Not to brag, but people with the S designation are few and far between. That's why we usually receive a lot of attention and support from either the government or the Legacy faction we decide to align with. But here comes the best part…"

She grinned.

"Currently, everyone is running around and foaming at their mouths because of you guys. All hundred of those who returned from the Forgotten Shore were marked as strategic assets. That is… that is an unprecedented event in human history. A sudden appearance of a hundred powerful Awakened is not that important in the grand scheme of things.

But if those Awakened all have a very high chance of becoming Masters, maybe even Saint… that would be enough to completely shatter the current status quo."

Sunny stared at her, thinking. Up until now, everything that he heard was in accordance with how he had imagined things to be. But…

"I get it. However, what's that about me being marked as SS? What does SS stand for?"

Master Jet nodded.

"I was about to explain. Above those marked as strategic assets, there are those marked as special strategic assets. SSA, or SS for short. This designation is even rarer. Actually, very few people had ever gotten it. What it means is that you are considered to have a very high chance of becoming a Saint.

You know how rare Transcendent are, right? So, of course, everyone now wants to be your friend. Including the government. Hence the seventh rank citizen status."

She looked at him with an apologetic smile and added:

"...Granted, out of the five people with the SS designation, you are the least outstanding. No offence."

Sunny glanced at her and smiled slightly.

"None taken. Who are the other four?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"Three of them are the only ones who received True Names from the Spell after leaving the Forgotten Shore — Awakened Athena, Awakened Kai, and Awakened Cassia. The fourth one is Awakened Song Sei Shan, who is… well… from one of the great clans. To be honest, your own achievements — while still incredible — pale in comparison to theirs.

But someone had noted that you went from being the second to last in the Academy rating to leading a hundred Sleepers to the Gateway during the last leg of the journey. You are seen as someone with great growth potential, in short."

He nodded, somewhat satisfied by that answer.

'It's not as bad as I thought.'

Actually, it was perfect. It was exactly the result he had hoped for — to be considered one of the best, but also the worst of the best.

He needed status to receive all the best opportunities in this world. He needed to have value.

Looking at the beautiful Ascended in front of him, Sunny took a sip of the tea, then smiled brightly.

"So, uh… that really sounds great. A great honor, and so on. But what I really want to know is what exactly can I get thanks to being the fifth most incredible person of an entire generation?"

Master Jet laughed and glanced at him with approval.

"Good. Straight to the point. Well, that depends. What is it that you want the most?"

Sunny didn't hesitate before answering, his tone steady and firm:

"To be free."

The smile disappeared from her face. Looking down at her tea, Master Jet lingered for a while, and then said wistfully:

"Then you're out of luck. I am sorry, but freedom is just a myth,

Sunless. No one is free in this world. Mundane humans have to toil and struggle to remain alive. Even if they are fortunate enough to reach the height of success and acquire great wealth, their lives still belong to the Awakened who protect them from the Nightmare Creatures. But the Awakened… we are not free, too.

Our lives belong to the Spell."

She paused, then added with slight sadness:

"If we want to survive its trials, we need to tether ourselves to others, be it powerful clans, or the government, or even just the members of our cohort. We have to depend on our allies and companions, and they in turn have to depend on us. All of us are chained to one another, Sunless, and that is the only way we can survive. So… think again about what you want. Think carefully."

Sunny stared at her for a long time, his eyes full of a dark, deep, heavy emotion. After a while, he sighed slowly, then said:

"If that is the case, then I want to be strong."

Chapter-365: Young Prospect

Master Jet looked at him for a while, then smiled.

"Perfect. That is a good goal to have... especially for people like us."

She took a sip of tea, then closed her eyes for a few moments.

"...Alright. There are many ways to become strong, some more straightforward than others. Ideally, you would want a powerful organization backing you up, but that is not the only way. In fact, such a partnership is a double-edged sword. You gain a lot, but also have to give a lot in return. I'll provide you with the basic information, and you can decide for yourself."

Sunny straightened a little and listened to her attentively. Master Jet thought for a few seconds, and then said:

"In this next few days, you will have to decide what Citadel to go to. That is not the same as joining a faction, but closely tied to it. Usually, young Awakened have to compete for the right to join a desirable faction and therefore be taken to the Citadel it operates from. Your case is different, though. Everyone wants you… and I mean everyone.

So you can pick any of the human Citadels in the Dream Realm to call home."

She paused, yawned, and then continued:

"As you should already know, there are three great human Citadels in the Dream Realm, as well as many smaller ones. The primary Citadels belong to the great clans, while the smaller ones can be either ruled by a lesser clan or remain independent. Regardless, all of them are situated around the three main human enclaves and tied to them in one form or another.

No matter where you go, you'll be in the sphere of influence of one of the great clans, it's just that you can be either in its center, close to the center, or on the periphery."

Sunny scratched his head.

"What about the government? Doesn't the government control many Citadels?"

Master Jet shook her head.

"Out there in the Dream Realm, the government has less influence than the great clans. It does, however, maintain a presence in all the important Citadels, which allows us to play a unique role. In the Dream Realm, we serve as a… connective tissue between the three factions, I guess. That flexibility has its own benefits, if you ask me."

She knocked lightly on the table and said:

"In any case, even if you decide to refuse the obvious choice of settling in one of the great Citadels, you'll have to select one of the three territories. They are not connected, as some people think. In fact, there are deadly and extremely hazardous regions separating each of the human dominions from each other. So, that is going to be your first decision — which territory to choose.

That made sense. If Sunny chose to go to Bastion, for example, he would have the opportunity to build a relationship with the great clan Valor, which ruled it, or any of the lesser clans in its sphere of influence. He would lose the opportunity to be recruited into the great clan Song, though, or any other clan that existed in a separate human territory. And so on.

Master Jet finished her tea and looked at the empty cup with a solemn expression.

"Oh, yeah. This is where I was supposed to give you the recruitment speech and try to convince you to join the government forces. But I'm not going to… you are smart enough to figure out the pros and cons of that path by yourself. All I will say is that you will never be truly accepted as an equal by the members of the Legacy clans — SS

designation or not.

Maybe they won't say it to your face, but you'll always be treated as someone… a tiny bit lesser. At best."

Sunny's expression darkened. Caster's face suddenly appeared in his mind, eyes full of disdain.

What had the proud scion called him… a mongrel?

'...Well, that mongrel got to your throat. Who's laughing now?'

Master Jet had a similar kind of expression on her face. Had she experienced her own share of hardships because of her lowly background? Most likely.

As Sunny was pondering what Master Jet's path to becoming an Ascended must have looked like, she sighed, then smiled with irony.

"Not that entering a Legacy clan is a bad deal. Actually, it's a dream come true for many, most even. With your renown, Sunless, any clan would be happy to give you patronage. Some might even adopt you. Hell… with your looks, even marriage is not out of the question!"

As Sunny choked on his tea and did an actual spit take, Master Jet laughed.

"Marriage… what marriage?!"

She shook her head.

"How do you think Legacy clans recruit talents? There are patronage contracts, adoptions, and matrimony, the latter being the preferred method when it comes to true gems. Anything to enhance the bloodline, you know."

As Sunny stared at her with wide eyes, Master Jet chuckled and continued:

"In any case, these are your options. You can go with the government, one of the three great clans, or a lesser clan. Each will provide you with plenty of incentives to join them instead of others.

The most wealthy factions will even shower you with soul shards. You and I both know how important those are. Few people can refuse such an offer."

She sighed wistfully, lingered for a bit, and then added:

"Of course, you can also remain independent. In that case, you won't have any special support outside the usual benefits of being a highly regarded Awakened — be it in the form of training, resources, or access.

But you also won't be tied down by any obligations, free to travel around the Dream Realm as you wish, making a living by hunting Nightmare Creatures or providing useful services to your Citadel of choice. There are plenty of independent Awakened out there, although few who are truly successful. It's a tough way to live."

Sunny rubbed his face, feeling slightly overwhelmed by the cornucopia of choices in front of him.

He had no need for soul shards, but being showered in them still seemed like a great experience.

Master Jet grinned.

"...So? What do you think?"

He hesitated for a while, then said:

"I don't know. That's a lot to take in. I'll… have to think about many things before making a decision."

She nodded, as though that was an expected answer.

"Good. Nothing good can come from rushing such a matter."

With that, Master Jet took a small, secure plastic container out of her pocket and pushed it to Sunny. He took it and raised an eyebrow.

"What's that?"

She shrugged.

"A pack of military-grade stimulants to keep you awake for a while. Don't use more than one patch at a time… wait, why am I explaining this to you? You're from the outskirts, so your knowledge of stimulant use must be extensive. In any case, with that, you'll be able to stay lucid for about a week. Contact me when you're ready to make a decision, and I'll arrange the rest.

Oh, also feel free to call me if you have any questions… scratch that. Not any questions, just important ones."

She stood up, stretched a little, and gave him a little smile.

"Well… it's been nice seeing you, Awakened Sunless. You did well, staying alive out there. Warms my heart to know that another one of us did. I'll be off, then. Time waits for no one, and all that."

She turned around to walk away, but Sunny stopped her:

"Uh… Master Jet?"

She glanced at him in confusion.

"Yeah?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then raised his newly issued, expensive, slick communicator:

"I, uh… I don't have your contact?"

Master Jet stared at him for a while, then grinned.

"Want to get my number, huh?"

Feeling his ears turning slightly red, Sunny coughed, but then took hold of himself and said with an easy smile:

"Yes. How else am I going to call you when I've made a decision?"

The beautiful woman shook her head, then took his communicator and entered her contact information into it.

Returning the communicator to Sunny, she looked at him and said:

"...Can't wait to hear from you, Awakened Sunless. See you later, then."

With that, Master Jet walked away, leaving Sunny alone at the table.

Looking around, he sat in silence for a while.

Finally, he said quietly:

"I wonder… can I get another of everything I ate? That'd be great…"

Chapter-366: Lessons of History

Some time later, Sunny exited the Instructors Lounge. The clear winter day welcomed him with chilly wind and tiny snowflakes dancing in the sunlight. Despite being dressed very lightly — his skin was covered only by the soft fabric of the simple training suit provided to him by the staff of the Academy hospital complex — Sunny did not feel too cold.

'That's being Awakened for you, I guess.'

If it had been a year and a few months ago, he would have been desperately searching for shelter, hoping that he would not freeze to death overnight or, even worse, get sick. But now, Sunny felt great. He wasn't even uncomfortable.

Pulling down his sleeves to hide the serpent tattoo, he inhaled the cool, perfectly filtered air, smiled, and started walking.

'Decisions, decisions…'

The conversation with Master Jet had been useful, but left him with more questions than answers. Each of the choices presented to him had alluring benefits, but also very serious drawbacks.

'Great clans, lesser clans, government, or independent?'

Sunny tried to imagine himself as a Legacy and silently shook his head. All that prestige, all that wealth, the admiration of the masses… being a Legacy meant being a part of the nobility, the elite above all elites. It was the exact opposite of what Sunny had been all his life.

…But who said that he had to remain the same in the future? From a pauper to a prince, that would be a nice transformation. Lord Sunless… that had a nice ring to it, didn't it?

There were serious disadvantages to making such a choice, of course.

Working for the government offered its own advantages, but at the cost of not receiving as much funds and resources, while being tied down by too many obligations. Both times Sunny had met Master Jet, she seemed busy and overworked. He couldn't imagine pursuing his goals with such a schedule.

One of the functions of the Awakened forces in service to the government was hunting down rogue members of their own kind. Awakened were people, after all, and there were criminals among them, too. Especially because many were traumatized and driven to the edge of madness by their experiences in the Nightmares and the Dream Realm.

If Sunny could absorb the essence of those humans he killed like all the other Awakened, that path could have offered him a faster track to saturating his cores. But as it was, he didn't see himself putting on the uniform, unless there were new Gates opening every day, thus providing him with the endless supply of Nightmare Creatures to hunt.

...By the way, how many Gates were opening in a given year, on average? Suddenly, Sunny realized that he had no idea. The propaganda never mentioned concrete numbers, only the fact that valiant Awakened had the situation under control. Did they, really?

The last option was to remain independent. That choice was seemingly in contradiction to his desire to acquire status and as many benefits as possible, but only on the surface. In fact, Sunny had already received most of what he wanted by becoming a high-ranking citizen and getting a free pick of any Citadel.

Of course, not having the vast resources of a Legacy clan or the government would be a huge loss... but it would also provide the best chance he had to keep all his secrets to himself.

All three options were worthy of being considered.

In the end, it all came to the fact that he simply didn't have enough information to make a decision. So, getting information was his first

priority. But… how?

'What was it called… a library? The Academy has to have one of those, right?'

Sunny, of course, had never been to a library — except for the ancient ruin in the Dark City — but he was familiar with the concept. There were similar types of public terminals in the outskirts, too, although using them cost credits. He had never had any to spare, so his visits were few and far between. And he went there for entertainment, not to study.

Now that Sunny had himself a state-of-the-art communicator, he could access a lot of information from the network, but doing so would doubtlessly leave a digital trail behind. Considering that some of the topics he wanted to research were rather dangerous, he wanted to remain as anonymous as possible.

'A library it is…'

Ten minutes later, he approached a square white building. Like most of the Academy, its walls were made out of smooth, pristine alloy, with wide windows that could be covered at any moment with reinforced shutters. There weren't many people in sight, so Sunny assumed that the library was not a popular destination among the Awakened.

Why would it be, if most of the information stored there could be accessed remotely? He was the weirdo for coming here in person.

Entering through an automatic door, Sunny looked around and blinked a couple of times.

Everywhere he looked, tall shelves full of paper books stretched into the distance. Between them stood tables meant for study, with several young men and women reading behind them silently. Most of them were using terminals to take notes, but some were actually writing by hand.

'What… the hell… is that?'

All those books, of course, were printed on synthetic paper… but why

have them printed at all?! Wouldn't it be way more convenient to read from a terminal, like all normal people did?

He had never seen a physical book in his life. The very idea of using one was mind-boggling.

…But then, it made sense. Digital data storage technology was highly advanced, but susceptible to various types of damage. During the dark times… which came before the even darker times of the Nightmare Spell… back when humanity had been consumed by an endless series of devastating wars and cataclysmic natural disasters, a lot of knowledge had been lost due to overreliance on digital mediums.

Whole layers of culture were irrevocably gone as the result.

Paper was still the safest way to preserve knowledge.

It's just Sunny had never thought about it before.

'Still weird…'

Trying to not show his confusion, Sunny furtively looked around and noticed a member of the library staff. It was a young man… no, wait… a young woman? A young person, with short black hair and intelligent brown eyes, who was currently reading a vintage-looking book. There was a badge on her chest, with the name "Ren" written on it.

At least Sunny thought that it was a name. Maybe it was some weird title among the librarians. Who knew what kind of strange customs they had here?

Approaching the young librarian, he stopped a couple of meters away and waited patiently to be noticed. However, "Ren" continued to read, fully engrossed in whatever story the book told, eyes full of deep emotion. Curious, Sunny looked at the title on the cover.

'Free Fall… sounds familiar. Must be a really great book. Maybe I should read it someday...'

"Uh… hey? Can I get some directions?"

Ren lingered for a couple of seconds, then reluctantly put down the novel and looked at him with a neutral smile.

"Of course. How can I help you?"

He lingered for a bit, then said with uncertainty:

"How can I read about the Dream Realm and the current state of human expansion into its various regions?"

Ren blinked a couple of times, then asked politely:

"Uh... can you be more specific?"

Sunny sighed.

"I want to see a map and a list of all the Citadels out there, as well as learn who owns what and why. I guess."

The librarian smiled brightly:

"Ah, you are a lover of history as well! Of course, of course. You have come to the right place. We have all the records you'll ever need here. Nickel!"

Sunny flinched.

'Nickel? What does nickel mean? What is happening?'

Suddenly, another young librarian appeared out of nowhere. This one was definitely a guy, wearing a wrinkled white shirt and a brown vest. He was tall and handsome, with slightly disheveled red hair, scruffy bristle on his chin, and a friendly face. There was a badge on his vest, too, with the word "Nickel" written on it.

The two were a strange pair.

"Nickel, could you please escort this young man to the Dream Realm History section?"

The tall librarian glanced at Sunny and gave him a wide smile.

"Sure. Please, follow me."

They headed into the depths of the library, leaving Ren behind. A few moments later, Sunny heard the rustle of paper pages coming from behind. The smaller librarian was once again engrossed in the book.

'Yeah, I should definitely check that novel out. A citizen of the seventh rank should be well-read, right?'

Nickel led him through the library, asking a few questions to narrow down the search. Soon, they arrived in front of a particular set of shelves, full of books having to do with the Dream Realm and the history of humanity's slow exploration of it.

The young man helped Sunny select a few, wished him luck, and disappeared as quietly and swiftly as he had appeared. Sunny looked at the spot where Nickel had been just a few moments ago, then slowly shook his head.

'A librarian… that guy could have been an assassin, instead.'

Well… maybe he was. Come to think about it, working in a library could be a perfect cover for clandestine operators.

'Maybe I should become a librarian, too…'

Making sure that no one was watching him, Sunny put his books on a nearby table and walked back to the shelves. There, he stared at a certain book that he had noticed a few minutes ago.

Its title was simple:

"The Immortal Flame"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then took the book off the shelf.

He was pretty sure that the Sovereigns were at least partially responsible for the fall of Neph's clan. If so, there had to be some hints of their identity in the history of the Immortal Flame.

'This has to be a good place to start looking for some answers… right?"

Chapter-367: Fog of Time

Sunny brought the book back to the table and sat down, looking at the plain cover with a complicated expression.

Of course, he knew a few things about the Immortal Flame clan. Everybody did, considering how prominent the achievements of its members were — even though Sunny missed out on receiving a proper education, the legendary figures of Changing Star's father and grandfather had long ago found their way from the pages of history into the popular culture.

Their names were pretty much synonymous with heroism and the indomitable nature of the human spirit, famously painted with a tinge of tragedy.

Immortal Flame was the first Awakened to become a Master, and Broken Sword, his son-in-law, was the first Master to become a Saint. Of course, they had not done so alone — each had a group of powerful companions to share the burden of challenging the Spell. So, a more proper statement would have been that they were the leaders of the first cohorts to conquer the Second and Third Nightmares.

However, the names of their comrades were not as well known. Sunny was sure that kids learned about them in school, but a street rat like him only had a general impression of who they were. Mostly, he just remembered that some of them would go on to establish the great clans.

But that was the thing about heroes. Sunny had once told Effie that one had to die to become a hero, and that was not a joke. A person could possess renown and respect for achieving something incredible, but it was the act of making the ultimate sacrifice that elevated one to heroic status.

That's why the Immortal Flame clan was revered much more than the other great clans — not only because the leaders of those cohorts came from it, but also because it had a tragic end.

…Or had it? If Nephis did manage to return to the real world, the fame of her clan would burn bright once again, perhaps even brighter than ever before. The survivors of the Dreamer Army already treated her like a deity...

With a sudden frown, Sunny awkwardly opened the book and started reading. Accustomed to reading off a screen, he struggled for a bit with the printed text, but then quickly got used to it and engrossed himself in the illustrious history of the famed clan.

The first part was dedicated to Immortal Flame himself, and although it was interesting, there was not a lot of information there that Sunny could use. He already knew that Neph's grandfather had been among the first wave of people infected by the Nightmare Spell, and that he fought against the Nightmare Creatures during the initial mayhem that followed its appearance.

Back then, millions of people were suddenly thrust into the First Nightmares and died, resulting in millions of Nightmare Creatures entering the real world. Of course, almost all of them were only of the Dormant rank, but even that turned out to be too much for the armies of the already reeling humanity to handle.

Whole nations were destroyed, and for a while, the planet was submerged into absolute chaos.

It was only thanks to people like Immortal Flame — who had not earned his True Name yet back then, of course — that the situation changed. There were those who had survived the First Nightmare, then entered the Dream Realm and carved their path to Gateways.

After returning to the real world, they united and fought back against the tide of Nightmare Creatures, eventually establishing a new world order.

The one that existed to this day.

'They were tough, tough people.'

Becoming an Awakened was hard enough even today, with all the accumulated knowledge about the Spell being freely accessible to everyone. Back when it first appeared, people like Immortal Flame didn't know anything. They didn't know what an Aspect was, how many ranks and classes of the Nightmare Creatures were there, what they meant, what the Memories and Echoes were, what a Gateway was...

Most important of all, they didn't even know if saving humanity was even possible.

And yet, somehow, they learned and fought back. Sunny couldn't imagine how dark and hellish that time must have been. Truly, they deserved his respect.

…But, sadly, they didn't deserve his time. At least not now. He had much more pressing things on his plate, so Sunny just skimmed through the pages describing Immortal Flame's life, his eventual triumph over the Second Nightmare, and heroic death.

The legendary Master died defending the evacuating cities from the onslaught of terrible creatures that entered the real world through a Category Five Gate. That happened just a year or so before Sunny was born, and had cost humanity an entire continent.

It was also the event that led to Neph's mother becoming Hollow, although that tragedy was not described in the book in great detail. All that was said about it was that Smile of Heaven died during the disaster while protecting civilians.

Sunny sighed, then concentrated on reading about Broken Sword.

Neph's father was not a Legacy by birth. In fact, he came from a very humble background, and rose from absolute obscurity to the very pinnacle of prominence thanks only to his talent and battle genius. He was a pauper who had won the heart of a princess and became the heir of the most venerated clan in human history.

The narrative of the book framed the history in a way that suggested

that Broken Sword had been heartbroken by the death of his wife, and that it was this loss that drove him to rise even higher and challenge the Third Nightmare. Miraculously, Broken Sword succeeded, becoming the first Saint.

There was no happy end to his story, though. Just a few years later, he perished in the Dream Realm while exploring a region that would later be categorized as a Death Zone.

The book ended with a long-winded tribute to the two legendary heroes and an explanation of how important their contributions were to the survival and future prosperity of the human race.

Sunny closed the book and shook his head.

'...What a load of crap.'

He might not have been educated, but like most people in the outskirts, Sunny had the instinctive skill of recognizing propaganda and reading between the lines of official statements. And this was what the book was — an embellished, partially fictional version of events that the government liked to feed to people. The truth was hard to come by.

There were several things about the supposed history of the Immortal Flame clan that didn't make a lot of sense to Sunny.

The first one was the circumstances of Smile of Heaven's tragic death. On paper, everything seemed fine, but Sunny knew that she was not, in fact, dead — not in the traditional sense of the word, at least. She was Hollow.

But how could she become Hollow? According to the book, at that point in time, Broken Sword had already become a Master. The two of them were partners both in life and in battle, leading their cohort together. That would suggest that Smile of Heaven was a Master, too.

But Masters traveled to the Dream Realm physically as opposed to in spirit, like Sleepers and Awakened did. There would have been no soulless body left behind if she had died there, so… how was it possible?

'The timeline doesn't add up...'

The second questionable point was Broken Sword's own death. Saints were extremely powerful beings, and killing one was not an easy task. Even when met with an overwhelming foe, a Saint should have been able to at least escape.

Saints simply did not die unless they had a reason to stand their ground and fight to the last breath. The only creatures that could kill them instantly were too powerful and rare to stumble on one randomly, even when exploring an unknown region of the Dream Realm.

Would Broken Sword have been so reckless and stubborn, knowing that he had a daughter who needed his care and protection? The legendary swordsman didn't strike Sunny as someone who would allow himself to die easily… unless some other forces were involved.

And finally, there were the other members of his cohort.

Sunny whispered their names:

"Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of the Valor clan."

Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of Valor…

'Aster, Song, Vale?'

Chapter-368: Aster, Song, Vale

Sunny spent several hours reading the book about the history of the Immortal Clan book, and now, finally, he was starting to feel sleepy. Not to the point of needing to use the stimulants provided to him by Master Jet, but enough to make it harder for him to concentrate.

Rubbing his face, he mentally repeated the names of Broken Sword's companions — the brilliant warriors who had become the first Saints of the human race.

'Asterion, Ki Song, Anvil of the Valor clan.'

Were they the Aster, Song, and Vale?

While not exactly the same, the names of the members of the legendary cohort were too similar to the three words that Nephis had once told him to never say out loud — among a couple of others — to be merely a coincidence.

'Let's see. What do I really know about all that stuff?'

Sunny knew that the three words held enough meaning to free Neph from the haze of the Soul Devourer's mind hex, at least partially. She had reacted to them very strongly… so much so that Sunny had actually been afraid for his life for a bit there.

She had also asked him a strange question…

He repeated it mentally, careful to not say anything out loud:

'Which Domain do you belong to?!'

Sunny had had no idea what a capital letter Domain was back then, and he didn't know now. But he was, indeed, sure that there was a capital letter there. He also suspected that people who had been

trying to kill Nephis for most of her life were connected to these mysterious Domains.

Which meant that Caster had been, too. From that, it wasn't hard to conclude that Domains and Sovereigns — who apparently willed the destruction of the Immortal Flame clan — were tied together, or more likely the same.

And all of it had something to do with Lineage Memories and the Attributes they bestowed, like [The Fire] Attribute that was described as the lineage of the Sun God.

Or his own [Blood Weave], which was apparently both incomplete and forbidden.

Sunny massaged his temples and sighed.

For a long time, he had no clue about what Aster, Song, and Vale meant. But after meeting Seishan, an adopted daughter of the great clan Song, he began to suspect that they were the names of the three Legacy Clans responsible for the numerous attempts on Neph's life… and maybe even the deaths of her parents and the downfall of the Immortal Flame clan.

Not only because of his inherent dislike of Legacies, but also because of how peculiar Changing Star had described her relationship with the Handmaiden:

'Trusted? Not really… never, actually.'

Why would Nephis say that she would never, ever trust Seishan? Maybe it was because Seishan belonged to one of the clans responsible for the undoing of her family. That was a logical assumption.

…But now, Sunny saw that, maybe, he was wrong. Maybe Aster, Song, and Vale weren't the names of clans — maybe, these were the nicknames belonging to three people.

Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of clan Valor.

They were Broken Sword's companions, and as such, Nephis had to

have met them a lot before her father died. Neither Broken Sword himself nor his daughter would have been addressing them by their full names, either. What would she call them?

Uncle Aster? Auntie Song?

Sunny looked down, a dark expression appearing on his face.

If these were really the people that had later sent numerous assassins to hunt down the little girl who trusted them… then the hatred Nephis had for them would be easy to explain.

…It would also be easy to explain how a Saint of Broken Sword's talent and might had died. Maybe... maybe he had been stabbed in the back by the people he trusted the most.

Even though there was no proof, it all made too much sense. Sunny felt that he was on the right track.

But how were Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of clan Valor connected to the mysterious Sovereigns? Did they serve them, or…

His eyes widened. A terrible suspicion entered his mind... not, not a suspicion.

A certainty.

'...It's them. They are the Sovereigns!'

The revelation hit him like a hurricane squall, too vast to comprehend all at once. And the key to it was a simple sentence that Nephis had once told him while overwhelmed by intense emotions.

How did he miss it?

Back when they had their falling out in a deserted alley of the outer settlement, Neph said:

'...You think Gunlaug can stop me? You think a Fallen Terror can stop me? Those three ghouls can stop me? No, Sunny. Nothing will stop me. Anyone who dares will die.

I'll kill them all.'

She had listed her enemies! She listed them in the order of magnitude. First Gunlaug, then the Crimson Terror. And then, the Sovereigns.

Three ghouls.

Aster, Song, and Vale.

Just as he was trying to cope with that idea, another frightening realization appeared in Sunny's mind. He shuddered.

Recalling another thing that Nephis had said, he then mumbled quietly:

'...No, I won't be the first one to conquer the Fourth Nightmare. I will be the first one to conquer every Nightmare.'

Back then, he had understood her as wishing to be the first one to beat the Fourth Nightmare, as well as all the rest. But her words could have been interpreted in a different way…

Among the Awakened, there was a general agreement that the names of the Ranks were not coincidental. Many people thought that the words used by the Spell described the ascent toward godhood… or the descent into profanity, as far as Nightmare Creatures were concerned. In many ways, these two paths were reflections of each other.

A person of a third Rank was described as Ascended, since they were rising above their human nature. A creature of the same Rank was called Fallen. This step had to do with ascension, or the opposite of it.

A person of the fourth Rank was described as Transcendent, since they had transcended the mundane and assumed some qualities of the divine. A creature of the same Rank was called Corrupted. This step had to do with transformation… it was no coincidence that the Aspect Ability the Saints received was called a Transformation Ability, after all.

The next step also had a special meaning to it. It represented authority and reign. Be it Supreme or Great, beings of that level were meant to consolidate their power and exert it upon the world. The fifth step of the Class hierarchy was much the same, allowing Nightmare Creatures to create and control armies of lesser minions.

Such creatures were called Tyrants…

What would a human who had reached the Supreme Rank be called, then?

Sunny trembled.

'A Sovereign…'

Nephis had not meant that she would not only be the first human to conquer the Fourth Nightmare, but also all the rest. She had meant that she would be first to conquer the Fifth, the Sixth, and the Seventh.

Because the Fourth Nightmare had already been conquered!

'Gods...'

Ki of the great clan Song, Anvil of the great clan Valor, and a person called Asterion had conquered it. And Broken Sword of the Immortal Flame... Broken Sword had been mysteriously killed in the process.

Aster, Song, and Vale had returned from the Fourth Nightmare wreathed in new authority, while Broken Sword perished. What was a Domain? Possibly the expression of the fifth Aspect Ability they had received, a special one, just like the special Transformation Ability the Saints possessed.

And, for some reason, they had chosen to keep their accomplishment a secret, instead exerting their influence on humanity from the shadows.

Wasn't it strange, that their names seemed to practically disappear from the pages of history after Broken Sword died? They, too, were the first to become Saints, after all.

Not if they had chosen to keep them hidden.

Wasn't it strange that Caster of Han Li clan seemed so loyal to the mysterious Sovereigns who had ordered him to kill the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan?

Not if they were the real power behind the great Legacy clans, to which his own lesser clan was beholden.

Wasn't it hard to believe that there were words that could kill just by becoming known to a person?

…Not if those words were the names of the three Supreme rulers that preferred to remain nameless.

Sunny groaned slightly, then covered his face with his hands.

'...Crap. Crap. Crap! Why did I have to go and get myself involved in all this crap?!'

He had a feeling that his life had just become much more complicated.

Chapter-369: Hidden Forces

Sunny spent some time staring at the pile of books in front of him with a dark expression. After a while, he sighed heavily.

So, there were hidden forces out there that exerted influence over the entire human race. The authority was as invisible as it was frightening. And now, he knew their names. The Sovereigns were at least as powerful as the government, or maybe even more so.

The exact relationship between these two hegemonic powers — one official, the other secretive — was not clear, but for now, knowing the full extent of the authority resting in the hands of the Sovereigns was not that important.

However, it was important to know that the world was not at all as he had imagined. It was much more dangerous.

Why?

Because if there was one thing that all wielders of authority shared, it was the animosity toward others encroaching on their power. That was just human nature — among the strong, only one entity could be the strongest. And so, that entity was always apprehensive of others growing stronger.

Bosses of criminal gangs in the outskirts were always paranoid of their lieutenants usurping them, and tended to violently get rid of those who were too successful. In the Dark City, Gunlaug reigned with an iron fist, destroying anyone who dared to be strong without submitting to his rule.

And Sovereigns would be much the same.

Since Sunny was already powerful beyond reason, for a person of his age at least, and had an even more frightening potential, the

Sovereigns would never allow him to exist outside their control.

Luckily, they did not know the true extent of his strength yet.

But since his main goal was to become stronger — as strong as he possibly could, as fast as he possibly could, to not fall behind Nephis — that… was going to be a problem.

Suddenly, some things about the Awakened society became more clear.

A long time ago, Sunny had learned that Master Jet had no chance of ever becoming a Saint. Apparently, one had to have a team of outstanding companions and a lot of support to attempt conquering the Third Nightmare, and she lacked both due to her "problematic personality".

Would Sovereigns allow someone outside their grasp to become a Saint? Most resources and knowledge about the Dream Realm belonged to the Legacy clans, especially when it came to anything having to do with higher Ranks. And the clans were controlled by the Sovereigns… which basically meant that they could prevent anyone from becoming a Saint simply by refusing their support.

How many talented Masters like Jet were being suppressed from growing more powerful because they didn't serve one of the Supremes? There were a couple of Saints serving the government, at least. Who were they really loyal to?

'Hate it… I hate it so much…'

Of course, Sunny knew that all of this was just his conjecture. And yet, one thing was certain: the choice presented to him by Master Jet was not as straightforward as he had thought.

In truth, he wasn't deciding between the great clans, the lesser clans, the government, and independence. He was deciding between entering into the service to the Sovereigns or refusing it.

And that choice was strained even further by his connection to Changing Star.

'...Damnation!'

With a sigh, Sunny stared at the bookshelves surrounding him, and then stood up. He had to get a few more books to read…

Many hours later, he tiredly put the last one away and rubbed his face.

Now that he had absorbed a lot of knowledge about the current geography and situation of the Dream Realm, a seed of a plan began to form in his mind. However, he still needed more information. He wouldn't be able to find it here, however.

For that, he would have to visit an old acquaintance.

One thing he did find, nevertheless, was a bit more information about the Sovereigns.

Asterion, Ki Song, and Anvil of Valor.

The last one was possibly the most renowned. An heir of the great clan, he was mentioned many times in the texts describing the human expansion into the northern territories of the Dream Realm, as well as the history of Bastion — one of the three central human Citadels in the Dream Realm.

In fact, he had apparently been responsible for slaying the titan whose remains were then used to create the chair Sunny was currently sitting on.

'Strong...'

Later, though, the traces of Saint Anvil disappeared. There was no mention of his death, but the reigns of clan Valor were now in the hands of his cousins… at least officially.

Ki Song was only slightly less famous. Unlike Anvil of Valor, she had come from one of the lesser Legacy clans, and it was by her hand that it was elevated to the status of a great one. The stronghold of clan Song, Ravenheart, was the second major human settlement in the Dream Realm. Its sphere of influence was separated from the other two territories by especially dreadful regions.

The border with the Valor clan was especially deadly, but also rather thin.

From what Sunny was able to learn, Ki Song was still the ruler of her clan, although she rarely appeared in public. She was known as a benevolent and charitable person, but that was pretty much all the information he could find. It seemed that it was her adoptive daughters who mostly acted on her behalf.

Seishan was one of them, although she was trapped on the Forgotten Shore for too long to be mentioned anywhere.

And lastly, there was a man named Asterion… he was the most mysterious of the three. No one seemed to know where he came from and where he went after the Broken Sword's cohort was disbanded. In fact, there was barely any mention of him at all.

Asterion was not connected to the third great Legacy clan, at least from the looks of it. Or any lesser clan, for that matter. Sunny couldn't even find out when and where he had been born, let alone if he was still alive.

Even in the texts describing the deeds of Broken Sword and his companions, the name Asterion was only mentioned in passing, as though he had never made any important contributions.

Sunny shook his head and scowled.

'Let me guess… he's the most terrifying of the three.'

That was an easy conclusion to make, because… it took one to know one. Sunny himself was barely mentioned and tended to hide his contributions.

'Ugh, my head hurts…'

The worst part was that this was only half of all the research he had to do. He had learned enough about the human position in the Dream Realm and the Sovereigns.

Now, he had to learn as much as he could about the gods, the daemons, and the Unknown.

…It was time to pay Teacher Julius a visit.

Of course, Sunny couldn't visit his old instructor with empty hands.

Pushing the books aside, he activated the terminal embedded into the table, lingered for a few moments, and then typed:

"...All of the Forgotten Shore is separated into three parts, one of which…"

Chapter-370: Exploration Report

It took Sunny the rest of the night to compile all of the information he had gathered about the Forgotten Shore into a succinct, comprehensive report. Knowing how passionate Teacher Julius was about researching the Dream Realm, Sunny tried not to miss any important detail.

He had described the geography and environment of the region to the best of his ability, including all the notable landmarks he visited or heard about, as well as the peculiar nature of the dark sea and the Labyrinth.

He also described most of the Nightmare Creatures he had seen, met, or fought, writing down everything he knew about their powers, behavior, and weaknesses, writing through the lens of his own experience where he could.

When possible, he included the information received directly from the Spell, complete with the descriptions of Memories and Echoes he knew about. Of course, he provided those texts both in the human tongue and in the runic language.

Lastly, he had written down the results of his exploration and studies into the history of the Forgotten Shore, describing in detail every engraving, every mosaic, and every mural he had seen. He also added his theories about what had happened to the ancient civilization, as well as his observations on how the ancient people of the Forgotten Shore had lived before the fall.

…Of course, there were things that he had kept to himself.

Sunny omitted anything having to do with the nest of the Vile Thieving Bird, the Weaver, and the underground chamber beneath

the ruined cathedral. He did not mention the Stone Saint, firstly because he wanted to keep her existence a secret, and secondly because she was connected to the Unknown.

He also avoided mentioning his battle against the coral golems and the banishment of the cursed sea, as well as the eventual fate of the Crimson Terror and the destruction of both the artificial sun and the Spire itself.

As far as everyone was concerned, Sunny had left through the Gateway with the rest of the Dreamers. No one had paid attention to his whereabouts in those last minutes, and he wanted to keep it that way. Well… no one except for Effie and Cassie, but he was reasonably sure that they would be discrete about certain things.

And even if they failed to keep their lips sealed, Sunny had ways to explain his actions without revealing the truth.

Finishing the report, Sunny leaned tiredly on the back of his chair and glanced at the screen. There, a long title was shown:

"Exploration Report on the Forgotten Shore, by: Awakened Sunless"

'I think that's good enough.'

Sunny had no idea how to write an academic paper… or a proper field report, for that matter. So he had written and structured this document in a way that would have been the most helpful for his younger self a year ago, when he had entered the Forgotten Shore without knowing anything about it.

A manual such as this would have made so many things easier.

With a sigh, Sunny sent the report to his communicator, then turned off the terminal and stood up.

Stretching his tired body, he swayed a little and yawned. It was already two days since his return to the real world, so the fatigue was slowly accumulating. Soon, he would have to start using the stimulants provided to him by Master Jet… but that moment had not come yet.

Sunny walked away from the table, then hesitated a little and came back. Picking up several books from the orderly pile, he returned them to the proper shelves.

After every book was back to its intended place, he nodded with satisfaction and finally left the library.

'What a fascinating place. I like it there…'

Looking back at the unassuming building, Sunny breathed in the cold winter air and remembered the description of Weaver's Mask:

'Weaver believed that knowledge was the origin of power, and so always hid behind numerous lies…'

What would the Demon of Fate think about this place? It was, after all, a palace of knowledge.

Sunny remembered the deceptive pages that presented a washed, polished version of history and smiled.

'Yeah… but it is also a palace of lies...'

***

It was weird returning to the Sleeper compound. The low, fortified building was much like he remembered, only weighed down by more snow. Sunny had not spent a lot of time here, but those days before the winter solstice were some of the most memorable in his life.

So much excitement, so much dread…

Who knew that he would not see it again for more than a year?

Entering the familiar hall, he looked around, half-expecting to see a crowd of nervous Sleepers. But, of course, there was no one around — everyone had already left for their first venture into the Dream Realm, and it was too early for the next year's Dreamers to arrive.

Walking through the empty halls, he found his way to the lower levels of the compound and approached the Wilderness Survival classroom, which also served as Teacher Julius's office. Opening the

door, he saw the spacious and tastefully decorated room where he had spent most of his short stay at the Academy. Suddenly, Sunny was overwhelmed by a wave of nostalgia.

'...Are you crazy? You're too young to be nostalgic about the good old days!'

His mentor was not at his usual place, sitting behind the wide wooden desk. Instead, the old man was standing in front of a glass case, studying the skull of a ferocious creature stored inside and taking notes.

He hadn't changed at all. Teacher Julius was still old, with messy grey hair, absentminded eyes, and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own. His posture and expression were full of quiet melancholy.

…However, as soon as he heard someone entering the classroom, his face changed, becoming lively and curious once again.

Turning around, the old man stared at the visitor with confusion. Then, his face suddenly lit up with a bright, infectious smile.

"Sunny, my boy!"

Chapter-371: Academic Achievement

Teacher Julius was just the same, but Sunny's perception of him had changed. Not only because of how instrumental the things he had learned from the old instructor turned out to be for his survival, but also because of the history books he had just read.

'How old is Teacher Julius, anyway?'

Sunny had never thought about it, but after learning more about Immortal Flame and the first generation of the Awakened, he couldn't help but see his mentor in a new light. Teacher Julius must have been if not of the same age as those legendary figures, then at least of the same generation. Those people had lived through much darker, much more violent times.

They had survived the end of the world, and built a new one from the ruins.

"...Sunny, my boy!"

Before Sunny could react properly, he was subjected to a passionate hug. Then, Teacher Julius unceremoniously pushed him to the nearest chair.

"Finally, you're back! I never doubted that you would return, not even for a moment. No student of mine would allow himself to die easily, you know! Wait, what am I talking about… of course, you know. You're one of my students yourself, after all!"

Sunny couldn't help but smile while listening to the excitement in the old man's voice. Before coming here, he was slightly worried that Teacher Julius would not even remember him.

Despite the fact that his course was not the most popular at the Academy, the eccentric instructor must have mentored thousands of Sleepers throughout his career. What was one more?

But, luckily, Sunny had been wrong.

"But, my boy… a whole year! Did you like it in the Dream Realm so much that you didn't want to return? Did you not think that your old teacher would be worried sick? In the name of the gods, what happened?"

Sunny hesitated a little, then said apologetically:

"Well, Teacher Julius… you see… I ended up in an unexplored region of the Dream Realm. And the only Gateway there was guarded by a Fallen Terror…"

The old man blinked.

"Heavens! How horrible. So what did you do?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Uh, well. In short... I met two beautiful girls, escorted them to an ancient castle, spent a few months exploring a cursed city, went on a long and arduous quest to find a magic crown, killed a devil, helped a princess become a queen, participated in a war or two, climbed an evil tower, and finally ended up near the Gateway. Basically… I survived. Just how you taught me to."

Teacher Julius listened to him very carefully, then nodded a few times

"Great! You did great! Just as expected from one of my students. But, Sunny…"

The old man's eyes suddenly shone brightly, full of excitement.

"Did you say… did you say something about an unexplored region?"

Sunny smiled, then activated his communicator.

"I did. In fact, I have compiled a lengthy report about things I have seen, fought, and discovered there. Would you like to take a look? I can send it to you."

Teacher Julius looked down with embarrassment.

"A report? Oh, you shouldn't have… you must be so terribly busy right now…"

However, even while he was saying that, the old man was already opening the file. As soon as he started reading, his eyes widened, and a delighted smile appeared on his face.

"...brilliant! This is brilliant! Wait, what's that… you even remembered to include citations in the original runic? That's my boy! Marvelous! Huh… well-preserved ruins?

A whole city?! Is there a… there is! Oh, my!"

***

It took Teacher Julius some time to skim through the report. Throughout the whole process, he continued to mumble under his nose in an increasingly excited tone. Some remarks Sunny understood, while some went completely over his head.

Like: "Greystone architecture... possible connections to the Third Wandering Archon?". Or: "Which era of the Babel Script would that correspond to?". Or: "Rats! That'll show that smug bastard Sando how wrong his Universal Origin of Rituals ramblings were!".

The old man's eyes gradually grew wider and wider.

Finally, he deactivated his communicator and looked at Sunny with an expression of profound exhilaration.

"You've... done exceptionally well, Sunny. Of course, your report is rough around the edges and needs a lot of work to be published, but this… this is going to make so many people happy! I can name at least a dozen theories that can be expanded, confirmed, or refuted thanks to all the new data you provided. And that's just off the top of my head!

Not to mention all the good that will come from the detailed descriptions of so many new types of Nightmare Creatures you included."

Teacher Julius smiled proudly:

"You truly have a heart of an explorer, my boy! Very few people do, and out of those, even less have a keen mind such as yours. Not to mention the ability to venture into the deadly expanse of the Dream Realm and not only come back alive, but also remember to look at more than just what's in front of them. But it is thanks to such people that we can deepen our knowledge of the Spell."

He sighed.

"Most of the Awakened only know how to hack and slash. They tend to look at us with very little regard, but it is only because of us that they know how to hack and where to slash. Luckily, there are few bright minds here and there."

Sunny stared at his mentor with a bit of surprise. He had not expected such a intense reaction. He just wrote down his findings about the Forgotten Shore to please the old man, considering they shared a hobby.

"Uh… I'm sorry? Published? What do you mean by that, exactly?"

Teacher Julius glanced at him with a humorous spark in his eyes.

"Oh, don't worry. This old man is not going to rob his own student of the reward. I'll help you bring this paper to a proper state free of charge. I don't even need to be put down as a coauthor, although it would make me happy if you did. What do I need money for? I have more money than I could ever spend already…"

Sunny tilted his head, then blinked a couple of times. His heart was suddenly grasped by burning emotions.

"Excuse me, Teacher Julius. But. Did you… did you say something about money?"

The old man stared at him with confusion.

"Yes, I did. Isn't it why you have compiled this marvelous report? To receive the contribution points from the government?"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then slowly shook his head.

"No? I, uh… I just though you would like to read it? I don't even know what these contribution points you mentioned are."

Teacher Julius looked at him for a while, then burst out laughing.

"Oh, oh my. What a good student I have! Ah, you really delighted me today, Sunny. Such pure dedication to the noble calling of an explorer! I wish more people were as selfless as you…"

'Selfless?! What do you mean selfless?! There's not a single selfless bone in my body… is there really money to be made from my stupid report?!'

The old man shook his head and said:

"The government rewards those who enrich the base of knowledge we have about the Spell, the Dream Realm, and the Nightmare Creatures quite generously. The more rare and more vital the information you submit is, the more contribution points you receive. These points can then be exchange for a variety of useful things, or simply turned into credits.

Considering that no one has ever explored the Forgotten Shore before, and how comprehensive your report is… I'd say you'll receive a pretty sizable sum. You really didn't know this?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"How... how sizable are we talking? Like if I want to rent an apartment… no, a house! If I want to rent a house in an area of the city with clean air, how many weeks would this reward buy?"

Teacher Julius gave him a strange look.

"Rent a house? What a strange example. Sunny, with how unique the data you contributed is, you don't need to rent a house. Wouldn't it be easier to just buy one? Uh, Sunny?!"

Sunny couldn't respond immediately, though.

He was in the process of falling out of his chair.

Chapter-372: Names of the Gods

After a while, he regained enough composure to continue the conversation.

Sunny and Teacher Julius chatted for a while, discussing the exact process of publishing the report, what changes would have to be made, and how they would work together to bring the project to fruition.

All of it, of course, was going to have to happen only after Sunny had settled in the Dream Realm and found a Citadel to anchor himself to. Right now, he did not exactly have time to work on an academic paper.

Teacher Julius also shared some of his knowledge about the human settlements in the Dream Realm and his views on how to decide on a proper Citadel. All his advice, however, could be described in one sentence:

"Find one with good plumbing."

Sunny wasn't sure what to make of it, but judging by the pained expression on the old man's face, it was indeed an important factor.

Finally, he managed to turn the conversation toward the things he really wanted to learn about.

"Speaking of that… I am really unclear on one thing. While exploring the Dark City, I found a few places of worship. However, the deities they worshipped seemed to be different from the ones I heard about in my First Nightmare. Did the native humans of the Dream Realm all have different gods?"

Teacher Julius looked at him and smiled:

"Ah! The gods. That is an interesting subject indeed."

He thought for a few moments, then said:

"Yes and no. The gods worshipped in different regions had different names, but from what we can tell, those names all described the same entities. The current consensus is that the "gods" of the Dream Realm were, in fact, actual beings, perhaps creatures of the Divine rank."

Sunny nodded.

"Really? Then… where are they now?"

The old man sighed.

"That is the strange thing about the gods. They are dead, just like everything else in the Dream Realm is dead. They seem to have been alive in the time periods of many of the Nightmares, but the ruins we have encountered and explored mostly describe them as being destroyed… by what or whom, we do not know. We also don't know if they existed before or after the Nightmare Spell itself appeared."

He lingered for a bit, then added:

"But we do know a few things about the gods. For example, how many of them there were…"

Sunny smiled.

"Let me guess… seven?"

Teacher Julius chuckled.

"You would think that, right? But no, there were only six gods. Their most common names were Sun, War, Beast, Storm, Heart, and Shadow. Although those names don't do them justice, truth be told."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? How so?

His mentor rubbed his chin, then said doubtfully:

"Well, a god is too vast of a being to be described with one word. Take the Goddess of War… oh, yes, their gender seems to be very mercurial… the War God is supposed to be the deity of warfare, and in a sense, he — or she — is. But he is also the god of life."

'Uh… what?'

"How does it make any sense?"

The old man smiled.

"War is synonymous with struggle, and what is life if not a constant struggle for survival? So the Goddess of War can also be called the Goddess of Life. She is also the goddess of progress, technology, craft, intellect, and through all of this, the patron goddess of humanity."

Teacher Julius got engrossed in his favorite field and went on a small tangent:

"Or take the Beast God. He is also often described as the Goddess of the Moon, as well as hunting, carnal desire, blood, beauty, and the cycle of birth and death. The Sun God is also the Lord of Light, a manifestation of fire, passion, creation, and destruction. The Storm God is also the god of the depths, of the oceans, of darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster. And so on…"

Sunny coughed.

"Uh… what about Shadow God?"

The eccentric instructor shrugged:

"Uh… I'm not too familiar with that one. As far as gods go, Shadow is not very prominent. Well, as a shadow should be, I guess. He is sometimes called the god of peace, death, solace, and mysteries. That's about it, I think."

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked carefully:

"I see. Hard to imagine that only six entities were responsible for all that. Were there perhaps any other divine beings?"

Teacher Julius thought for a few moments, then shrugged.

"There certainly were many beings that were either partially divine, or even almost as powerful as the gods themselves. We don't know much about them, though. Take daemons, for example…"

Sunny held his breath.

"Daemons were such mysterious creatures! They were described as having power almost equal to that of the gods, but of a different nature. They also seemed to have created themselves, or at least appeared out of nowhere. Almost nothing is known about them, except for the fact that there were seven of them... one more terrible than the other."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Terrible? Why were they terrible?"

The old man smiled:

"What can be more terrifying than a creature that came out of nowhere, wielding enough power to wage war against the heavens? Don't forget that what humans fear the most is the unknown. Perhaps the gods were much the same."

Sunny hesitated for a long time, then finally asked:

"Teacher Julius... have you ever heard about the Unknown?"

His mentor gave him a weird look, then laughed.

"What kind of a question is that? Haven't I dedicated my whole life to exploring the unknown? I think the lack of sleep is getting to you, my boy. Come, I have wasted enough of your time. A newly Awakened like you should be running around, trying to find patronage or ingratiate themselves to a welcoming clan.

I'll recommend you several books on the gods and divinity, to read once you have settled out there in the Dream Realm..."

Sunny smiled weakly, realizing that Teacher Julius did not know

anything about the Weaver, the reasons for why the gods were dead, and the Unknown.

Strangely, he felt relieved.

Chapter-373: Reunited

Leaving the Sleeper Compound, Sunny felt as though even the winter cold could not keep him from feeling sleepy anymore. Wondering what time it was, he looked up out of habit and glanced at the sun.

The sun was all wrong.

Suddenly, Sunny was wide awake, his hand instinctively outstretched to summon the Midnight Shard. It took him a few moments to recognize his error.

'Oh. The sun is normal. It's just not the same as on the Forgotten Shore.'

He also didn't have to measure time by observing the sky anymore. He had a communicator that could show him what time of day it was, up to the exact nanosecond.

Shaking his head, Sunny headed back toward the hospital complex. He was late for a… a memorial. Of sorts.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army were supposed to gather today to celebrate those who remained alive and remember those who had fallen.

Entering the medical center, he headed toward the conference hall, but then lingered for a moment in front of a monitor attached to the wall. There, a hundred names were shown, listing everyone who had made it back.

And on the very top of it, there were three very special ones:

"Raised by Wolves"

"Nightingale"

"Song of the Fallen"

Effie, Kai, and Cassie…

Sunny stared at the three True Names for some time, then slowly lowered his gaze. Right beneath was his own name.

With a grim expression on his face, Sunny opened the doors and entered the hall.

The former Sleepers of the Forgotten Shore were all there, at least those who had awoken at the Academy or could make it there for the memorial. He looked around the crowd, searching for familiar faces.

It was strange to see all these people back in the real world. Especially without Nephis.

Now that they were out of danger and had lost their leader, there wasn't a lot to keep them together, and so much to split them apart. Before, they were united by necessity and the irresistible will of Changing Star. Now, nothing remained to prevent the old grievances from pulling them apart…

And yet, the hundred survivors seemed strangely united. Perhaps it was the shared trauma of their harrowing experience in the Dream Realm, or something else that Sunny couldn't quite understand, but there was no division between them. On the contrary, every Awakened gathered in the hall seemed to share an invisible bond with all the others.

'...Weird.'

Many people welcomed his arrival with warm greetings. Sunny smiled awkwardly and did his best to reciprocate their goodwill. After a few such encounters, he finally noticed Kai at the back of the crowd.

Sunny stumbled and stared at his friend for a couple of seconds.

'I'll be damned…'

How could that guy become even more gorgeous?

The Awakening made Kai's slender figure even more graceful, his perfect face even more handsome, and his electric green eyes even more mesmerizing.

His luscious dark auburn hair was now neatly cut and styled, his clothes were simple and exquisitely fashionable, and the several pieces of jewelry he wore somehow managed to enhance every one of those features by bringing it just the right amount of attention.

'Such… such injustice!'

With a resentful sigh, Sunny made his way through the crowd and approached his friend. Kai noticed him from afar, and then, the conference hall suddenly seemed to become much brighter due to his brilliant smile.

"Sunny! You are finally here!"

Sunny wanted to answer, but then froze for a second, noticing a stranger next to the charming young man. A sickly, terribly gaunt young woman was sitting in a wheelchair, staring at them with a tired expression.

There was clearly something defective about her body. She was unhealthily thin, with pale skin stretching over brittle bones and a strange twist to her spine. Her legs seemed lifeless and weak, tucked awkwardly on the step of her wheelchair. Her neck was clearly struggling to support the weight of her head.

…It was only when the young woman smiled mischievously did he finally recognize her.

"What's the matter, doofus? You've been struck dumb by my beauty?"

With a giggle, Effie spun her wheelchair, as though giving him the chance to take a good look.

'Effie… that's... that's Effie?'

Sunny stared at her for a couple of moments, trying to connect the image of the mighty huntress he knew — tall, strong, beautiful, and full of vigor — to this weak, gaunt young woman. He only spoke

when the pain of the Flaw pierced his mind:

"Not really. What… what the hell happened to you?"

Effie smiled and shrugged.

"Nothing. That's how I've always been, in the real world."

Something moved in Sunny's memory. He remembered how the two of them sat on the support beam of the ruined cathedral, talking in whispers.

'...for some of us, the real world was more of a hell than the Dream Realm.'

That was what Effie had said, back then.

Noticing the strange expression on his face, she grinned.

"Ah, don't worry about it. At least now that I'm Awakened, I can move my hands. Look at this…"

She grabbed the handles of the wheels, then balanced her chair at an angle and spun it around again.

"See? Ain't that the coolest thing you've ever seen?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then said quietly:

"...Yes. One of the coolest, by far."

Effie gave him a smile, then glanced at Kai:

"See, Night? Your celebrity aura got nothing on my burning charisma."

The young man looked at her, but didn't say anything. Instead, he suddenly took a step forward and gave Sunny a big hug.

"Sunny! Thank gods you're alive!"

Sunny squirmed a little, but then surrendered to being embraced. With a resigned expression, he endured for as long as he could and

then said through gritted teeth:

"Why shouldn't I be alive, fool? I wasn't the one whose unconscious, lanky body had to be dragged all the way to the Gateway!"

Kai squeezed him even tighter, then finally released his hold on him. Taking a step back, the charming young man hesitated for a couple of seconds and sighed.

"Still. With your luck, I am surprised that the whole Spire didn't just fall on your head."

Sunny froze, then forced out a smile.

"Yeah. That… would have been terrible, wouldn't it…"

Chapter-374: Dinner with Friends

Soon, several instructors appeared. In a solemn and sonorous atmosphere, each of them gave a small speech, congratulating the survivors of the Dreamer Army on overcoming the immeasurable hardships and returning to the real world alive. They also spoke about those who had fallen, and offered words of solace, saying that their sacrifice would not be forgotten by mankind.

After all, mankind only continued to exist because of young men and women like them.

To Sunny, those words rang hollow and empty, but they affected many people in the crowd. He saw a few people crying, the others trying to keep a brave face. Everyone had lost a friend, a companion, or a loved one during the tumultuous last days on the Forgotten Shore.

Finally, Instructor Rock took the stage and spoke in length about the meaning of being an Awakened, their duty to safeguard humanity, and what they should do and expect in the next few days. However, at some point, he was interrupted.

"Lady Nephis! Tell us what happened to her!"

A hum of voices rose above the crowd, everyone joining in that plea. Instructor Rock sighed.

"Calm down, Awakened. I'll tell you everything we know."

The survivors of the Dreamer Army grew silent, staring at him with piercing intensity.

The mighty man hesitated for a few seconds, then said:

"As all of you know by now, the Gateway of the Forgotten Shore seemed to have been destroyed. Changing Star, who took it upon herself to distract the Fallen Terror to allow her people to escape, did not make it through in time."

A heavy, tortured tension hung in the air. The young men and women gathered in the hall kept silent, but their faces betrayed the storm of painful emotions raging in their hearts.

Instructor Rock continued:

"However, she is still alive out there, in the Dream Realm. Her vital signs and brain activity readings are all stable. It seems that Lady Nephis managed to escape the Terror, at least."

He didn't need to say the rest. Everyone understood what it meant: she was trapped in the Dream Realm, with no way to come back.

Sunny glanced at the newly Awakened around him, wondering what their reaction would be. Guilt? Sorrow? Fury?

However, he was surprised by what he saw.

A few moments later, a voice resounded from the crowd, full of adamant belief:

"She will return! If anyone can do it, it's Lady Nephis!"

A wave of voices then joined that first one, all expressing their agreement.

"That's right! She is Changing Star of the Immortal Flame! She won't die!"

"Who says that she escaped from the Terror? I bet that Lady Nephis is currently roasting its meat, looking at a map and thinking where to find another Gateway!"

"Exactly! Immortal Flame cannot be extinguished!"

There was no guilt, sorrow, or fury. Only hope.

Only faith.

Uncomfortable, Sunny turned to Effie and Kai. Both seemed to be a little bit sad, but strangely calm.

"What, uh... what do you guys think?"

Effie hesitated for a few seconds, then shrugged.

"I sort of agree. If anyone can make it out alive from there, it's Princess. It sounds impossible, but… I mean, it's her. You know how she is."

Kai remained silent for a bit, then nodded.

"That's what I believe, too. Or… or at least try to believe."

Saying those words, he looked around with concern and said:

"But Cassie must be devastated. Have you seen her?"

Sunny stared at him grimly, then turned away.

"...I did earlier. She is."

Strangely, today the blind girl was nowhere to be found. To his relief.

Kai sighed, then rubbed his face.

"Ah, I really want to sleep. It's tough, staying awake for that long. What about you, guys?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I'm fine for now. I also have a pack of military-grade stimulants to keep me awake for a few more days."

Effie glanced at them and grinned.

"I am not sleepy at all. However… to be honest… I am dying from hunger. There has to be food here somewhere, right?"

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Some time later, they were in the cafeteria of the hospital complex. Sunny and Kai were already done with their dinner, and observed with dark fascination as Effie was finishing her fourth serving. There was a small mountain of empty plates in front of her.

Finally, the huntress was done with the food and leaned back tiredly in her wheelchair, full of satisfaction.

"Ah! That's life. Sunny, go bring me something to drink."

He stared at her with a dark expression and asked:

"...I already brought you the last three trays. Why don't you ask Kai?"

Effie grinned.

"Aren't you the youngest? Respect your elders, brat! Also, Kai and I are bigshots now. Way out of your league. Why would I ask a valiant True Name Awakened to serve me food when there's a nameless gremlin like you loitering around?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, then obediently stood up and went to bring the young woman a few drinks. When he returned, Kai looked at him apologetically.

"Sorry about that, Sunny. Actually, I am really surprised that you didn't receive a True Name as well. No one deserves it more than you, in my opinion. Really."

Sunny shifted uncomfortably and said:

"Yeah, well… you're not wrong! I do deserve a True Name, don't I? What a travesty."

Effie giggled.

"Hey, Night. What do you think Sunny's True Name would be?"

Kai blinked a couple of times, though for a bit, then said with a smile:

"I'm not sure. Something like… Famous Last Words?"

He chuckled lightly, and then added:

"Or "No Really, That Happened"! What about you, Effie? What do you think?"

Effie glanced at Sunny, then smiled with mischief.

"...Looks Good in a Dress."

He stared at her with murder in his eyes.

"Hey!"

While the gaunt young woman was laughing, Sunny turned to Kai and frowned.

"Speaking of True Names. Effie I can understand, but… Nightingale? You were really named just like your band? What's up with that?"

Then, he looked at the charming archer with suspicion and said in a grave tone:

"Kai, tell me honestly… the Spell… is also one of your fangirls, right?"

His friend choked on his drink, then wiped his face awkwardly and gave Sunny a reproachful look. Finally, he looked down and sighed.

"Uh… if it is, then not in a good way. At best, it's a sasaeng…"

Chapter-375: Separate Paths

Sunny smiled and leaned back on his chair, then looked at his friends with curiosity.

There was a question he really wanted to ask, but tried not to up until now.

"...What's your second Ability, anyway?"

His words hung in the air for a few moments. Suddenly, Kai coughed with embarrassment and looked away. After a couple of seconds, he said in a strange tone:

"I, uh… can see really far now, when I want to. Even when there's no light. I am also supposed to be able to see through illusions and all forms of obfuscation, whatever that means. And… uh… I can also see through objects."

Sunny and Effie stared at him and asked almost simultaneously:

"Like, through walls?"

"Like, through clothes?"

Kai hid behind his glass, lingered for a bit, and then answered in a small voice:

"...Yes. But I would never!"

While Sunny tried to imagine why would Kai refuse to look through walls, Effie laughed out loud.

"I see, I see. What a great Ability!"

She shook her head, then turned to Sunny and asked:

"Hey, doofus. I bet you often wanted to stab me with something sharp. Wanna try?"

He frowned in confusion, then raised an eyebrow.

"No. Why would I stab you?"

Effie looked at him with expectation clearly written on her face, then sighed in disappointment when he didn't move.

"Ah, that's a shame. I wanted to demonstrate my second Ability to you. Basically, it makes my whole body invulnerable. Well… comparatively, of course. Skin of steel, that sort of deal. A very sweet comprehensive defense boost, if I do say so myself!"

Sunny blinked and looked at the gaunt young woman with a bit of awe. Indeed, that was a very powerful Ability. Combined with Effie's previous one, it turned her into an exceedingly formidable presence on the battlefield. As if she had not been a real menace already…

Effie glanced at him and asked curiously:

"Well, what about you?"

He shifted slightly.

"A very neat type of conditional short-distance teleportation. Kai can see through walls, I can go through walls… while you can just plow through them, I guess. In your usual barbarous fashion…"

Effie grinned.

"Plowing, huh? Interesting choice of words. I wonder if…"

Sunny hurriedly changed the subject.

"So, uh… what are your plans, guys? What Citadels are you going to?"

His sudden question changed the mood of the conversation. For a while, a strange silence settled among them. All three had contemplative, wistful expressions on their faces.

This situation was inevitable, really, but they tried to avoid the discussion for as long as possible. Mostly because it was both slightly awkward and slightly sad. Back on the Forgotten Shore, the three of them had forged a bond, and now, depending on their choices, that bond would most likely either weaken or break.

The future was going to lead each on their own path, perhaps in opposite directions.

For better or worse, they were about to go their separate ways. Perhaps fate would bring them together again, one day... or perhaps not.

After a while, Effie sighed.

"I don't know, really. I have received invitations from both clan Valor and clan Song, but… you know me. I don't do well with authority. Plus, none of them have moved a finger to help me when I really needed it. Only now that I am a hot commodity are they all suddenly kind and friendly. Rubs me the wrong way, to be honest."

She looked at her wheelchair, then slumped in it tiredly.

"Anyway… I might take them up on the offer, or I might not. It depends on what the fastest way to get ready for the Second Nightmare would be. Maybe I'll have a better chance of becoming a Master soon if I stay independent and don't have to compete against the actual heirs for resources and attention."

After the Second Nightmare, one's spiritual body became their physical body. Reaching the rank of a Master would free Effie from her terrible disability, so Sunny understood her motivation perfectly.

Now he knew why she had said that for her, striving to conquer the Second Nightmare was the only way.

...Funnily enough, through no wish of his own, Sunny had ended up in a similar situation.

Kai remained silent for a few moments. Then, he too sighed.

"As for me… my agency has secured me a very good position in

Bastion. So I'll be going there soon. I won't have to fight another Nightmare Creature for a long, long time. I guess. Maybe even never."

For someone who was speaking about being safe and comfortable for the rest of his life, he didn't sound too happy. There was a note of reluctance in his voice. Even… shame.

Sunny frowned.

"You drop that tone immediately, Kai. There's nothing wrong with living like a person should, not having to worry about being eaten every goddamn day. Don't even think about feeling bad about it. Got it?"

The charming young man smiled sadly and nodded.

"I do. Please forgive my ungratefulness. But what about you, Sunny?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then shrugged.

"Well… I am rich now. You won't believe it, guys, but as it turns out, scribbling a few words about the things you see in the Dream Realm can actually earn you money. And! I think I can weasel my way into receiving a salary from the Academy as a research assistant, whatever that means. So, uh… actually, I haven't decided on a particular Citadel yet.

But I can pick pretty much any of them, since the government is being very friendly."

Both Effie and Kai stared at him with incredulous expressions, clearly trying to imagine Sunny as an academic, or even an Instructor. Then, both shook their head simultaneously.

"Can't imagine."

"Yeah, sounds wrong."

"About the Citadels, though..."

"So which one are you going to choose?"

He thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"Don't know yet. But I can tell you a secret… something that very few people know or think about. A very wise man told me to base my choice on it."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then said seriously:

"Plumbing! The secret to a happy life is to find a Citadel with great plumbing…"

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Soon, it was time to say goodbye. Their parting was both warm and bittersweet. After seeing Kai and Effie off, Sunny lingered outside for a bit, and then returned to his room on one of the underground levels of the hospital complex.

It was already evening, and his eyes were full of sand. With an irritated snarl, Sunny took one of the stimulant patches out of the pack and plastered it on his skin.

Immediately, a cold fire flowed through his veins. His heart accelerated, and his mind cleared. Sunny felt refreshed, energized, and ready to chew on mountains.

Of course, there was a price to pay for such a boost. It would be inevitably followed by a debilitating crash of the same magnitude. Unless he used another stimulant, that is, and then another, and another. Only with each new one, the duration of the effect would shorten, and the strain on his body would increase.

If he was a mundane human, his heart would have probably exploded just from one of these unassuming patches. The government didn't joke around with its military tech.

…But he wasn't ready to make a decision just yet. He had to do a few more things.

Like finally checking on his new Memory…

Chapter-376: Broken Oath

Summoning the runes, he glanced at a particular cluster.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [M… Un…old], [Weaver's Mask], [Broken Oath].

The last one, [Broken Oath], came from the twisted simulacrum of one of the seven ancient heroes of the Forgotten Shore, the Lord. Even though the coral golem had turned out to be just an Awakened Monster, Sunny had high hopes for this Memory.

But before he concentrated on it, Sunny stared at the rest of his arsenal.

'One, two, three…'

Twelve. After a year of constant battles and bloodshed, he only had twelve Memories. Of course, he would have had much more if not for the need to feed Saint. The taciturn creature demanded a vast amount of resources to get her to the two hundred shadow fragments, which was one of his goals.

If not for that, he would have made a real windfall. Sunny already considered himself wealthy thanks to the contribution points Teacher Julius was going to arrange for him. But if he had a dozen or two extra Memories to sell… well, he would have been not just wealthy, but extravagantly so!

Enough to buy several houses, if he wished to.

Maybe he still could sell some…

Looking at his trusty weapons and tools, Sunny hesitated.

Now that he could use Shadow Step to blink from one place to another, he didn't need to enhance his mobility that much. So, Prowling Thorn and Dark Wing were potential candidates to be auctioned off… maybe? They still had their uses, though.

The rest he couldn't even imagine selling, at least not before finding better alternatives. Even the Silver Bell, which wasn't really all that useful, but had something of a… sentimental value.

The little bell was the first Memory he had ever received, after all. And its description was, sort of… it touched something in his heart…

'Curses, I just used the stimulant. Why is my mind so scattered?'

With a frown, Sunny finally concentrated on his new Memory.

Memory: [Broken Oath].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Charm.

His eyes widened slightly.

'Jackpot!'

Another charm… such luck! Excited, Sunny read further:

Memory Description: [They made a terrible oath to destroy the curse, or be consumed by it. Those who have broken the oath were consumed by the curse, and those consumed by the curse have broken their oath. In the end, none could escape their promise.]

'Huh… morbid. I guess... I guess that's how the carapace legion was born?'

He looked at the next string of runes:

Memory Enchantments: [Oathbreaker].

Enchantment Description: [The Broken Oath erodes souls of all those

who approach it.]

Sunny held his breath for a few moments.

'A soul attack!'

Both the Nightmare Creatures and the Awakened had many ways to destroy their enemies. Kinetic damage — called physical for simplicity — was the most common, but there were many others. Among them, soul damage was the rarest and hardest to defend against.

It was no coincidence that Soul Reaper Jet, whose Aspect allowed her to strike directly at the soul, was so feared.

And now, Sunny had a soul attack of his own in the arsenal.

There was one problem, however…

'Wait… erodes souls of all who come near? Will it affect me then, as well?'

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

Sunny hesitated for a while, then sighed, and summoned the Memory into existence.

Soon, a glistening gem made out of polished crimson coral appeared in his hand. A second later, he suddenly shuddered and groaned.

As soon as the Broken Oath appeared, a sickening sensation permeated his entire being. It was as though someone was slowly draining the very life out of him… not only that, but he also felt weaker.

Looking down, Sunny saw his shadows ripple and react. The surly one stared at him with outrage and waved its hands in the air angrily, while the friendly one was hugging itself pitifully and pacing.

'Damnation…'

He had recognized the debilitating feeling that the gem produced. It

was the same aura that had weakened him when he fought the coral golem. It was also the infinitely weaker version of the annihilating soul attack of the artificial sun.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny dismissed the Broken Oath. Only when it disappeared completely could he breathe freely again.

"Crap…"

That was one serious side effect. How was he supposed to use his new charm if it would be slowly killing not only his enemies, but also Sunny himself? Drop it on the ground, use Shadow Step to blink away, and hope for the best?

Sunny sat quietly for a while, thinking. Then, a tentative smile appeared on his face.

'Wait… that should work, right?'

Turning away from the runes describing the soul-destroying gem, he concentrated on the description of his loyal Shadow Demon.

Shadow: [Marble Saint]

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Demon.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament].

Shadow Fragments: [80/200]

Concentrating on the [Underworld Armament] Ability, Sunny read:

[Shadow Saint's armor can accommodate a charm Memory to inherit its enchantments.]

His smile widened.

'Good... that's the first part...'

Looking a bit higher, he found another string of runes:

Attribute: [Stalwart].

Attribute Description: [The Stone Saint is highly resistant to all forms of damage, as well as being fully immune to mind and soul attacks.]

Fully immune to mind and soul attacks…

'Yes!'

Sunny let out a satisfied sigh. The Broken Oath was pretty useless by itself, but when combined with Saint's special Ability and Attributes, it would make his Shadow even more lethal.

That was because Saint was a very special kind of demon. One whose will couldn't be intruded upon or shaken. Both her mind and her soul… well, the shadow that inhabited her body instead of a soul… were utterly indomitable.

He only had to make sure to not be anywhere near the living statue while she had the crimson gem set into her armor.

Tricky, but doable.

And speaking of armor…

He was not done exploring his Memories yet.

In fact, he had left the best for last.

Looking at the shimmering runes, Sunny concentrated on a particular string. One that looked broken and incomplete:

Memory: [M… Un…old].

Now that he was Awakened, he could finally restore the broken onyx armor he had bought from Stev for a measly handful of soul shards.

The Ascended suit of armor of the Sixth Tier — the most powerful Memory he owned.

Or haf seen, even… well, except for the Weaver's Mask, of course.

Summoning the [M… Un…old], Sunny strained his muscles and, with some effort, managed to place it on the floor in front of him. Even now that he was an Awakened, the weight of the stone Memory was not something he could endure easily without using both of his shadows or wasting essence to enhance his strength.

Breathing a bit heavily, Sunny studied the damaged Memory.

The suit of ancient plate armor was jet black in color. Its design was intricate and solemn, radiating a feeling of dark resolve and stalwart, adamantine grace. Its glossy surface seemed to absorb and devour any light that fell on it. All parts of the armor were perfectly fitted to one another, creating an almost seamless barrier of impenetrable steel.

Well… not steel, yet. Stone.

The ancient armor looked extremely similar to the one Stone Saint had worn, and now that the Shadow was a demon, they were even more alike. The onyx armor in front of Sunny was still more impressive, though. More… regal. As if created for a being of a higher status.

And just like the armor worn by the Saint, it would only transform from actual stone into the miraculous stonelike alloy if risen from its passive state.

It couldn't be done yet, though, because its spellweave was damaged. To repair it, the self-restoring properties of the broken Memory had to be activated by an infusion of essence. Which no one back on the Forgotten Shore could do.

Now, however, things were different.

Now, Sunny was an Awakened. Not only could he control the flow of shadow essence inside his body, he even had the Soul Serpent to help him guide it.

Placing his hands on the cold surface of the onyx breastplate, Sunny closed his eyes…

And sent the essence into the onyx armor…

Chapter-377: Mantle of the Underworld

The shadow essence flowed through the coils of the Soul Serpent into his left hand, then surged into the cold black onyx. There was no resistance that Sunny had to overcome to transfer it from his body into the stone armor — after all, the armor was his Memory, and as such, could be considered to be a part of his soul.

The surge of energy rushed through the ancient armament, then returned to his body through his right hand. Soon, a stable cycle was established, with a constant current of shadow essence circulating through both Sunny himself and the onyx armor.

It was a strange feeling. As if there was an ethereal river flowing through him, moving endlessly in a circle. Thanks to the [Shadow Guide] Attribute of the Soul Serpent, its current was especially swift and powerful.

Soon, the onyx armor became saturated by shadow essence. As Sunny watched, it slowly began to change.

This was the fundamental trait of both Saint and her armaments, with which the Memory shared a common origin — both were made out of a strange living stone. When imbued with soul energy, the taciturn demon's body turned from stone to bizarre stonelike flesh, while her weapons turned to stonelike steel.

Sunny knew this because he had seen the remains of both the original Stone Saint and her fellow stone warrior after they had been defeated by the monstrous iron spiders. After being destroyed, the living statues had turned back into inanimate stone.

The Memory was transforming right in front of his eyes. Soon, its glossy black surface felt different to the touch. Colder, lighter, more

resilient… closer to metal than stone.

The living armament had assumed its true form.

'And now, the most important part…'

Sunny gazed through the dark metal and peered at the ethereal weave hiding beneath it. The pattern of the diamond string was much more complex and vast than any that he had ever seen… with the exception of the Weaver's Mask.

But then, nothing could compare to that miraculous Memory.

There were six bright embers serving as anchors for the countless threads of light inside the onyx armor.

…However, the weave was damaged and chaotic. Thousands of strings were torn and disconnected from the rest of the pattern, breaking its flow and logic. Because of that, the armor couldn't repair itself before — it needed to be imbued with essence and turn from dead stone to enchanted metal for the self-repairing properties that all Memories possessed to come into effect.

And now, it was.

With an expression of wonder on his face, Sunny observed as the spellweave started to repair itself. The diamond string moved against the invisible winds that had been playing with them before. The torn ends turned whole again, the separated threads became connected to the rest of the pattern once more.

Thousands upon thousands of ethereal strings moved in unison, their motions full of strange symmetry and grace. Watching the beautiful weave restore itself filled Sunny with a deep feeling of satisfaction. He smiled.

'...This feels right.'

He continued to pour essence into the ancient armor and watched as it slowly returned to its intended state.

And then, it was finally whole once again.

With a content sigh, Sunny removed his hands from the breastplate of the onyx armor and retrieved the shadow essence back into his body. After the Memory turned back into stone, he dismissed it.

After that, not wasting any time, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea, walked to stand between the two Shadow Cores, and summoned the Memory down.

As soon as the silhouette of the ancient armor appeared from the sphere of light, he glanced at the runes surrounding it.

'Come on… be good… be great! I've waited for this moment for so long…'

He read the first string of runes:

Memory: [Mantle of the Underworld].

'Whoa... sounds awesome. But, Underworld? That word again.'

One of Saint's Abilities was called [Underworld Armament]. Her own runes also described the creator of the living statues as residing in the cavernous halls of a dark domain… as well as being the last child of the "unknown".

'Was… was Saint made by the ruler of the Underworld, or something?'

Sunny shivered slightly, then glanced at the intricate black armor with a solemn expression.

Well… if her creator was indeed one of the seven daemons and a sibling to Weaver, the Demon of Fate, then ruling the Underworld might not have been out of the question.

Shaking his head, Sunny returned to reading the runes.

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: VI.

Memory Type: Armor.

Memory Description: [Vowing to never look upon the Goddess of the Black Skies again, the prideful demon retreated into the darkness beneath an unassailable mountain chain. He wasn't the first to lead his army against the gods. However, he was the first to shed their blood, as well as learn the secrets of his own.]

'Huh… lead an army against the gods?'

When Teacher Julius mentioned that daemons had enough power to wage war against the heavens, Sunny had thought of it as a figure of speech. But maybe it was not? Perhaps a few of them had really tried.

And what was that about the secrets of the blood…

'Ah, endless questions, like always…'

Shaking his head again, Sunny turned away from the description and continued to read:

Memory Enchantments: [Living Stone], [Feather of Truth], [Stalwart], [Underworld Armament], [Prince of the Underworld].

Sunny stared at the long list of Enchantments for a while, his heart beating wildly in his chest.

'Can't be…'

[Living Stone] Enchantment Description: "This armor can repair itself while being worn."

[Feather of Truth] Enchantment Description: "The weight of this armor can be changed at will."

[Stalwart] Enchantment Description: "This armor provides extremely high protection against physical attacks, high protection against elemental attacks, and a moderate amount of protection against mind and soul attacks."

[Underworld Armament] Enchantment Description: "This armor can accommodate a Charm Memory to inherit and enhance its enchantments."

[Prince of the Underworld] Enchantment Description: "This armor grows stronger according to the amount of opponents its wielder defeats."

Vanquished Foes: [1213/6000].

Sunny remained silent for a while.

His dark room, which was situated deep underground, was silent for a long time.

After a while, he shifted slightly and said in a low voice:

"Well, I'll be damned…"

Chapter-378: A New Beginning

Sunny sat in the darkness for a while, thinking. At first, he wanted to immediately put on his new magnificent onyx armor, but then dismissed that idea. There would be time later… for now, he was too tired. The effects of the stimulant were slowly wearing off, and he had spent too much shadow essence already.

He did, however, note a few things about the Mantle of the Underworld.

The first fact he noticed was that it shared two enchantments with Saint. However, there were subtle, but important differences between the versions of [Stalwart] and [Underworld Armament] possessed by the onyx armor and the taciturn demon.

The Memory offered better protection against physical and elemental attacks, but lacked the complete immunity to mind and soul attacks, possessing a moderate amount of protection against those rare and fearsome types of damage instead. Overall, this was an advantageous trade-off, since most Nightmare Creatures relied on more common ways of destroying Awakened.

...Unless they didn't.

The more interesting difference, however, was hidden in the description of the [Underworld Armament]. While Saint's armor could accommodate a Charm Memory to inherit its enchantments, the Mantle of the Underworld could both inherit… and enhance them. Just one word made for so much difference. Sunny couldn't wait to explore this subtle trait of his new Memory.

[Living Stone] and [Feather of Truth], meanwhile, were pretty obvious. That didn't mean, however, that these enchantments did not have a lot to offer. He could already see many interesting ways to apply both in battle. The downside was that both were active

enchantments, and as such, would require a constant flow of essence to function.

What's worse, the armor couldn't even be used without activating the first one.

But the most interesting enchantment was, without a doubt, [Prince of the Underworld].

'A growing Memory…'

Pondering about that strange and miraculous enchantment, Sunny couldn't help but think about the First Lord of the Bright Castle, who had supposedly been the first master of the Mantle of the Underworld.

What tier and Rank was the onyx armor when he had first found it? How many of the vanquished foes had been defeated by his hand? Was the Mantle of the Underworld one of the reasons for his legendary achievements?

For the longest time, Sunny had wondered about how an Ascended Memory of the Sixth Tier had ended up in the hands of humans in the Dark City. It had to have come from destroying a Fallen Terror… or so he had thought. Now, there were other possibilities.

But all these questions were doomed to be left unanswered. Sadly…

The First Lord and his companions had taken the answers with them to the grave.

Remembering the lonely cairn in the Hollow Mountains, Sunny sighed. Then, his thoughts wandered to something else.

'The Goddess of the Black Skies… Storm God?'

Teacher Julius had described Storm God as being the deity of the depths, of the oceans, of darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster. He also said that the gender of the gods was subject to change. Stars, darkness, and storms were somewhat related to black skies…

Frowning, Sunny remembered the runes describing the Mantle of the Underworld. Indeed, "black skies" could also be translated as skies covered by storm clouds, or the night sky.

'Interesting...'

Translating the runes reminded him of something. Opening his communicator, Sunny found a note he made during his conversation with Effie and Kai.

There, their True Names were written down in runic language.

'Nightingale…'

Kai's True Name was pretty simple to understand, but the Spell chose to interpret it rather creatively. Even though Sunny had no idea if the Dream Realm had actual nightingales, the runes described a pretty similar bird… probably. Translated literally, they meant Sings Beautifully from the Night Skies. Which could mean either Enchanting Siren of the Night, or simply a nocturnal bird.

'Huh…'

Effie's True Name was more straightforward, but also far more morbid. Raised by Wolves could mean just that, but a more direct translation had a different meaning.

Born from Wolves, or... Born from Being Eaten Alive.

Sunny shivered, then deactivated the communicator and closed his eyes for a second.

There was one more thing he could do…

Summoning the runes once again, he found the description of Weaver's Mask and read:

Memory Enchantments: [Mantle of Lies], [???], [Simple Trick].

Now that he was an Awakened, he could try to activate the mysterious enchantment marked by three question marks. Even if all of his essence would be only enough to keep it working for a split

second, he could.

…But he was reluctant to.

Sunny knew nothing about the enchantment, but from the boundless, inconceivable pattern of the mask's weave, he got a feeling that it was somehow connected to eyes, vision, and sight.

He suspected that the Vile Thieving Bird was a Cursed Devil — at least... and it had been driven mad by just one glance at the reflection in the Weaver's eye. Would something similar happen to him?

There were things, after all, that humans weren't meant to see.

Even gods struggled with looking at some truths, it seemed.

'...No. Not now.'

Sunny was somewhat willing to risk it, but doing so right now would have been really unwise. What if he passed out from shock? That would transport him to a random spot in the Dream Realm, and knowing his luck, that spot would be populated by horrors beyond imagination.

With a sigh, he dismissed the runes and took out another stimulant patch.

'Some other day… when I am much, much stronger.'

With that, he removed the old patch and put another one in its place.

'Time to put all I learned together and make the final decision. What should I choose? Stability or danger?'

Safer road... or an unknown path?

***

Two days later, Sunny was sitting on a bench opposite the entrance to the Academy hospital complex with a cup of bitter dark coffee in his hand. In his other hand, he was holding a slick communicator.

Taking a sip of the terrible drink, Sunny grimaced, then lingered for a few moments and sighed.

Finally, he pressed the call button to contact Master Jet.

She answered after a couple of seconds. Her voice sounded a little tense, and there were strange, barely audible whispers mixing with the background noise of the call.

"Ah! Awakened Sunless. What… wait, give me a second…"

Something crackled violently, and in the next moment, the background noise was gone.

"Much better. So… have you decided?"

Sunny took another sip of coffee and said:

"Yeah."

He hesitated for a bit, then added:

"As far as joining the Legacy clans or the government… I've decided against it. I don't know enough and have no leverage to ensure a good deal. Plus, that option will remain open for me in the future even if I stay independent for now. The reverse, however, won't necessarily be true.

In any case, it's a serious matter, one that should not be decided upon in a span of just a few days, while suffering from sleep deprivation and stimulant abuse, to boot."

Master Jet turned on the video function of the call and smiled. The smile was bright and beautiful, but Sunny couldn't help but notice that right behind her, something was currently on fire.

"Makes sense. So then… which Citadel?"

That was the real question. While Sunny decided to remain independent for now, while leaving himself an opportunity to join a powerful faction later, his choice of an anchor was going to limit which factions he would be able to interact with later on.

He was silent for a bit, then said:

"Clan Valor territory."

Master Jet nodded.

"Solid choice. Bastion? Or a smaller Citadel?"

Sunny drank some more coffee, then spoke the name of the Citadel he had chosen into the communicator.

Jet's eyes widened slightly. She didn't say anything for a while, then asked with a bit of surprise in her voice:

"Are you… absolutely sure?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. I thought about it long and hard."

Master Jet stared at him with a slight frown for a few moments, then shrugged.

"Well, okay then. But, uh… that might take a couple of days to arrange. The place is too far north, and there's not a lot of Saints in those parts. But I'll find a way."

Sunny smiled.

"Thanks. I really owe you one."

She smiled in response and then winked at him.

"Be careful with what you say, Sunless. I might just take you up on the offer and come knocking on your door one day, asking for a favor."

He took a sip of coffee and shrugged.

"Sure. No problem. Oh… and call me Sunny, please. Everyone does."

Master Jet blinked a couple of times, then grinned.

"Alright."

Turning away from the camera, she quickly glanced at something beyond the screen, and then added:

"...Chained Isles, huh? Good luck, Sunny. I hear it's a real hell."

Chapter-379: Chained Isles

In the vast empty darkness, myriads of distant stars were shimmering with ethereal light. The vista of the night sky was boundless and stark, full of promise and mystery.

Above it was another sky. This one blue and bright, full of sunlight and gentle winds. White clouds flowed across it, telling enchanting stories with their movement and shapes.

Between the bright sky and the dark sky, an island floated in the air. It was surrounded by freely levitating pieces of rock and ancient masonry, its surface awash in the soft radiance of the sun, its underbelly veiled by impenetrable darkness.

Several gargantuan chains stretched away from the island, cracking thunderously as it slowly rose and fell.

The clangor of iron was almost loud enough to drown Sunny's voice… almost.

"...Argh! Drop dead, bastard! Damn you! Crap!"

Sunny had a good reason to be screaming bloody murder, because he was seconds away from being eaten alive.

Near the edge of the flying island, where the forest covering its surface made way for a narrow expanse of patchy grass, a massive wolf-like beast was currently trying to swallow him whole.

The Nightmare Creature was the size of a small truck, with fur as tough as steel wire and a long, terrifying muzzle. Its jaws were wide enough to bite a human in half, and strong enough to crush both bones and armor into dust.

Currently, those jaws were trying to close on Sunny, and the only

thing preventing them from doing so were his hands — he held the upper jaw of the beast with one, and the lower jaw with another, trying with all his strength to keep them open.

His muscles felt as though they were about to explode.

The abomination was also trying to bite down on the hateful human with all of its tremendous might, but for the moment, neither of them could overpower the other.

It was just a matter of time, though.

Sunny was burning through his essence to augment his physical strength, and those reserves were not endless. When the well of power ran dry, he would lose this contest.

'Not good…'

About two months had passed after he had chosen to come to this place, and now, Sunny was starting to seriously doubt his decision.

Why didn't he just go to Bastion? He would be safe and sound behind its walls right now. Maybe even in the embrace of a beautiful...

As though trying to add insult to injury, the Nightmare Creature interrupted his thought by letting out a deafening growl and doubling its efforts to devour him. Sunny felt a putrid wind brush past his face and grimaced miserably. The stench coming out of the beast's maw was unbearable.

'Just... don't faint...'

His hands trembled, and the terrible fangs of the beast came a few centimeters closer to sinking into his flesh. Sunny gritted his teeth, and then yelled:

"Saint! A little help here, dammit!"

But the taciturn demon was nowhere to be seen. She was a good couple hundred meters away, standing atop a low hill.

Sunny groaned and tried to push the jaws of the abomination away,

but it was useless. The damn creature was just too strong...

A few seconds later, though, something hissed past his shoulders, and two menacing black arrows sunk into the feral eyes of the beast. They arrived almost simultaneously.

'Thanks!'

Using the momentary shudder that ran through the wolf's body, Sunny pushed the jaws sideways, allowed them to close with a loud crack, and poured as much essence as he could into a vicious throw.

The massive body of the Nightmare Creature flew for good ten meters and crashed into a trunk of an ancient oak, plowing straight through and turning it into splinters.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew in a shaky breath. Then, he quickly glanced back.

Far in the distance, a graceful dark silhouette was outlined against the bright sky. Saint held a powerful Memory bow in her hands, its limbs made out of horn and polished black wood. Two ruby eyes burned behind the visor of her helmet, and a crimson coral gem was set into the center of her obsidian breastplate.

'Nice shots…'

She wouldn't be able to help him any further, though, at least not for a dozen seconds. Sunny was pretty sure that the Shadow had spent all of her arrows while they were fighting with the pack, and now, she had to dismiss and summon them anew.

At least the leader of the monstrous wolves was now blind… probably. Not that it was going to stop the bastard.

The Nightmare Creature was already rising from the ground, howling furiously.

'Curse you…'

Panting, Sunny crawled a few steps and picked up the Midnight Shard. The austere tachi was as sharp and deadly as ever…

The problem was, that the last remaining abomination was clearly of the Fallen Rank, so the stalwart blade was having trouble breaking through its hide.

Still, Sunny had to work with what he had.

Making sure that the sun was behind him, he stood up and leaned on his sword, watching tiredly as the massive beast turned its ugly head and faced him.

The dreadful wolf lowered its muzzle to the ground, then growled with murderous rage. Bits of saliva flew from its maw and fell to the ground. Then, pushing with its mighty hind legs, the Nightmare Creature lunged at Sunny.

Covering the distance between them in an instant, the beast brought its terrible jaws on the tiny human once again… and bit on emptiness.

In the place where Sunny stood just a moment ago, there was now nothing but air, light… and shadows.

Appearing from the Nightmare Creature's own shadow, Sunny dove between its hind legs and thrust the Midnight Shard upward, aiming at the soft belly of the fearsome beast. The tachi pierced the pale skin without much problem and sunk into the flesh of the abomination.

As blood poured to the ground, the creature staggered and fell. A low whine escaped from its mouth.

Very soon, it was all over.

Falling onto the ground in complete exhaustion, Sunny tried to catch his breath and listened to the silence. Soon, he heard the sweet sound of the Spell whispering:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Dread Wolf.]

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-380: Above and Below

Sunny lay still for a while, then summoned the runes and looked at the dreadful number:

Shadow Fragments: [197/2000].

He sighed.

The task of pursuing power had turned out to be much more difficult than he had anticipated, and for one simple reason: after becoming an Awakened, he now received fewer fragments from killing Nightmare Creatures.

If before he could get two by slaying an Awakened Beast, now it was one. If before he could receive four by slaying a Fallen Beast, now it was two. What's worse, his hopes of growing strong by hunting down scores of Dormant creatures had been mercilessly crushed, because he didn't receive any fragments from killing those weaker than him at all.

Which was a real disappointment. Who didn't love punching down? Sunny was at the very bottom of the power structure for most of his life, so he had been really looking forward to having an opportunity to bully something weaker than him, for a change. Alas, it had turned out to be a waste of his time.

Of course, Sunny had also become tremendously more powerful. He could handle himself in a fight with Fallen Beasts, and even Monsters… especially with the help of Saint. That was the only reason why he had not fallen off behind Nephis, who was still alive somewhere in the Dream Realm, and growing more powerful with each day.

He had not managed to diminish the gap between them by a lot, but at least he was not worse off than at the start of this.

Thinking of Changing Star, Sunny looked into the distance. A somber expression appeared on his face.

'...Think about something else.'

There was only one bright side to all of this.

While Dormant creatures did not bring him any shadow fragments, they did bring him Memories. And those Memories could be fed to Saint.

Her own counter now showed:

Shadow Fragments: [157/200].

'Not bad…'

A low, eerie sound of giant iron links scraping against each other interrupted his thoughts. The island Sunny was currently on seemed to have entered the ascending phase, so his time here was running short.

Standing up with a sigh, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard and walked over to the corpse of the Dread Wolf. He had to retrieve the soul shards before it was too late.

The Chained Isles… the Chained Isles were a strange place.

Situated at the very north of the territories claimed by humans, they bordered the Hollow Mountains. That was one of the reasons why Sunny had chosen that region as his hunting grounds.

But it wasn't the only one…

The whole region consisted of numerous islands that somehow floated in the air, connected to each other by gargantuan iron chains. It was mostly unexplored, and the Awakened population here was not very large. Notably, there were not a lot of Masters and Saints here, especially those associated with the Legacy clans... be it great or lesser.

What the Chained Island had in abundance, instead, were the

Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, from Dormant ones, to Awakened, Fallen, and terrifying Corrupted abominations. Each island had its own menagerie of horrors, and the level of threat differed from one to another. Most were utterly deadly, though. Much more deadly than an average Awakened was supposed to be able to handle.

But Sunny was not an average Awakened. To him, this was a perfect hunting ground, a place where he could sharpen his blade without being seen by those who served the Sovereigns. Or at least he had thought that way, at the start… right now, he was starting to suspect that it was more of a place where he could die terribly without being seen by anyone who would have been able to help.

Just like Master Jet said, the Chained Islands were a hellish land.

And not only because of the Nightmare Creatures. The place itself was capable of killing a person… or, rather, its sky could.

High above the floating island, there was the usual sky with the sun, the moon, and beautiful stars that shined brightly at night.

However, there was another sky in this strange land, the one that was below the islands. It was always dark, and the ethereal lights burning at an unimaginable distance in its vast expanse only looked like the stars. No one really knew what they were.

The only thing that humans knew was that the Sky Below was seemingly endless. On his first day on the Isles, Sunny had asked what was down there. The answer he received was simple:

"Nothing."

Descending into the Below was not immediately dangerous, but there was nothing there. Some crazy daredevil had once fought his way through the hunting grounds of Nightmare Creatures that dwelled beneath the islands and spent a whole week flying straight down. He had to turn back, eventually, because out there in the boundless darkness, his mind began to show signs of breaking apart.

Even the winged Echo he used to descend into the Below had almost gone insane.

But other than being absolutely empty, the Sky Below did not seem to pose a threat.

…Flying above the Chained Isles, however, was rather deadly. The higher one went, the more crushing their weight would become, until they would either fall down, or their body would simply implode.

That was why every human on the Chained Isles knew to pay attention to the sound of rattling chains. Every island in the region went through cycles of ascending and descending, and as they rose too high, the pressure on their surface grew tremendously, to the point where it was impossible to move... or breathe.

Ideally, Sunny had to get off the ascending island before that happened.

He should not have been lingering to retrieve the soul shards from the corpses of the monstrous wolves he and Saint had killed, really. But…

His eyes glistened with avarice.

Soul shards meant money, and if there was one thing Sunny really enjoyed, it was making money. No amount was ever enough.

An independent Awakened like him had a lot of expenses…

'Fine. It's fine. I'll be off this thing in no time…'

He quickly cut the dead beasts apart and fished out the soul shards from inside their bodies. Hiding the beautiful crystals in his pack, Sunny hesitated for a little, then sent his essence flowing and tossed the first corpse off the edge of the island.

He was planning to come back here soon, and leaving so much meat lying around could make the future visit rather problematic.

...Sunny only had one more carcass to dispose of when he suddenly noticed a swift silhouette descending from the skies.

Commanding Saint to hide herself in the shadows, he summoned the Midnight Shard and looked up tensely.

'...What the hell?'

Surrounded by a halo of sunlight, a majestic griffin was quickly approaching the island. At first, Sunny assumed that it was a Nightmare Creature, but then noticed a human figure on the monster's back.

A human rider meant that the magnificent griffin was an Echo.

Sunny's face grew dim.

Very few people could have such an Echo on the Chained Isles. And out of those...

He was pretty sure that he knew the identity of the unwelcomed visitor.

Chapter-381: Roan of White Feather

The griffin folded its white wings and dove down, then opened them up near the ground to slow its fall. Sunny raised his hand to cover his eyes from the dust that was sent into the air by the powerful gust of wind.

'...Strong.'

The mighty beast shone with ethereal light and disintegrated into a rain of sparks, letting the rider land nimbly on the ground. He regained his balance swiftly and straightened, then turned to Sunny.

The man in front of him was tall and had broad, powerful shoulders. He was wearing a light armor crafted from the adamantine scales of an unknown monster, with a blue scarf wrapped carelessly around his neck. His hair was the color of straw, as was his short beard.

The stranger's eyes were bright blue, and dangerously attentive.

Sunny stared at the man for a moment, then bowed respectfully, hiding his face in the process.

"Master Roan."

Indeed, the man in front of him was none other than Ascended Roan of the White Feather clan — one of the only three Masters on the Chained Isles.

Well… there were probably only three.

Unlike the Forgotten Shore, this region of the Dream Realm had several Gateways. Two were found, conquered, and turned into Citadels by humans. Both Sunny and Master Roan — as well as pretty

much everyone else on the Chained Isles — belonged to one of them, the Sanctuary of Noctis. That Citadel was ruled by the White Feather clan, which was one of the vassal clans to the great clan Valor.

The second Citadel was rather mysterious. It was situated at the very edge of the region, near the dreaded Hollow Mountains, and belonged to Valor itself. Only those in direct service to the great clan were anchored at its Gateway, so Sunny had no idea what went on there, and how powerful the Awakened stationed at the Citadel were.

He did, however, know a bit about Master Roan.

The man was married to the only Saint on the Chained Isles, after all!

...Roan looked Sunny up and down, then gave him a friendly smile.

"Do we know each other?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, sir, we haven't met before. I have just Awakened a couple of months ago, so… uh... I am new to the Chained Isles."

The strapping Master nodded and then glanced at the carcass of a Fallen wolf that Sunny had failed to throw over the edge of the island in time. When Roan turned to him again, there was a measured look in his piercing blue eyes.

"Did you kill that beast?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then nodded.

"Yeah. I… well, I can be very lucky, on occasion."

The tall man shook his head.

"This is a Fallen Beast… ah. You must be Sunless, then. From the Forgotten Shore."

Sunny smiled.

'Curses. He knows my name...'

He had nothing against the older man, but preferred to remain unknown and underestimated. Especially when dealing with Legacies.

"Yeah. That's me."

Master Roan nodded, as though everything suddenly made sense, and then briefly looked at the sky.

"You should know that it is dangerous to remain on an ascending island, right? Why are you still here?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then shrugged.

"I was just about to leave and escape to the next one over when you appeared… sir."

The tall man sighed.

"Yeah, that's what I figured. You've spent all your luck on that beast, though, it seems. All three of the island connected to this one are also ascending. You wouldn't have been able to escape even if you left on time."

Sunny stared at him for a while, a sour expression appearing on his face.

'...Damn it.'

"Uh… what about that beautiful griffin of yours, sir? Surely, it can bring us both away to safety?'

Roan grinned.

"He is rather beautiful, ain't he? Well, not that it matters. In theory, we can dive below the islands and escape through the Sky Below, but believe me, you wouldn't want to meet the things that dwell on the dark side of the Isles. Even I prefer to avoid those things."

Sunny blinked.

"Then what do we do?"

The tall man laughed.

"I guess you're about to experience your first Crushing, Sunless. Don't worry, though! The chains of this island are on the shorter side, so it won't ascend too high… well, most likely. And I'll be here to bring you back to the Citadel if you pass out. Provided that we survive, of course."

'Great…'

This wasn't Sunny's first Crushing, actually. And that was exactly why he didn't want to experience it again.

But there was no other choice, it seemed.

With a sigh, he dismissed Saint, who had been hiding in the shadows all along, and took off his pack. Then Sunny found a soft-looking patch of grass and placed it on the ground. Behind him, Master Roan dismissed his scale armor and unwrapped his scarf, then tied it around his waist.

The less weight was on the human body during the Crushing, the easier it was to endure, and the more chances of survival there were. However, the Puppeteer's Shroud was made mostly out of soft fabric, so Sunny left it on. He also wanted to neither reveal nor dismiss the Soul Serpent.

As the giant chains groaned and rang thunderously, and the island rose higher and higher, the two of them lay on the grass and prepared to be crushed.

Master Roan stared at Sunny's slender physique, then at his own mighty muscles, and sighed with envy.

The Chained Isles was one of the very few places in the Dream Realm where being small and light was an advantage.

"...If you feel like passing out, turn your head to the side. Wouldn't want to suffocate on your own spit or vomit, right? Uh… sorry for being crass, kid."

Sunny grimaced and thanked the older man in a suppressed voice.

He was already feeling an invisible force pushing him into the ground.

'This... is going to suck.'

As if answering his thoughts, the invisible force suddenly grew stronger, crashing into him like a giant hammer.

Chapter-382: The Crushing

Laying on the soft grass, Sunny felt his body grow heavier, and heavier still. The island continued to rise into the sunlit sky, and with each minute, the crushing pressure became slightly more unbearable.

The ancient forest covering its surface bent, a rain of leaves falling to the ground. The mighty trees lowered their branches, almost as if trying to touch the ground. With a loud crack, a few weaker ones broke and plunged down, showering everything around with sharp splinters.

Sunny grimaced, feeling his whole body struggle under the strain. He could still move and breathe without too much trouble, at least… for now. Soon, the island would rise high enough to make any kind of movement almost impossible.

…And if he was especially unlucky, it would continue to ascend, eventually making it hard to even inhale. Hopefully, the chains would draw taut long before that.

The skies above the Chained Isles were beautiful, but also forbidden. Nothing could survive their crushing embrace — neither humans, nor Nightmare Creatures. Nor anything else…

Well, except for one thing.

Shifting his gaze, Sunny looked straight up and found the shape of the Ivory Tower drifting high above the world, wrapped in a veil of clouds.

The Ivory Tower was the only thing that seemed to be capable of withstanding the deadly pressure of the forbidden sky. It was a tall, magnificent pagoda built out of flawlessly white material that was neither stone nor wood. The island on which it stood was very small, barely wider than the base of the tower itself, and surrounded by

drifting slabs of shattered marble.

Seven broken chains hung from the soil of the island, swaying as it moved.

The Ivory Tower was visible in the sky both during the day, bathed in sunlight, and at night, glowing beautifully with the reflected radiance of the moon.

No one knew what the mysterious structure was and why it remained untouched by the obliterating force that destroyed everything else that dared to rise above the Chained Isles, since no one had ever managed to withstand the ever growing Crushing to get anywhere near it.

Many even believed it to be a mirage.

'Crap…'

The island on which Sunny had the misfortune of getting stuck had finally reached the highest point of its ascent and shook violently as the chains connecting it to other isles drew taut. The pressure at this height was torturous… but not deadly.

His bones were not breaking under the assault of the Crushing, and he could still breathe, even if with great effort.

It would have been better if Sunny could wrap the second shadow around his body, but he didn't want to appear too strong in front of Master Roan.

Speaking of the devil…

The mighty rider chose that exact moment to speak. His voice sounded a little strained:

"Hey, Sunless. Can you breathe alright?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and struggled to speak. In the end, all he could manage was an affirmative grunt.

"Good, good. This is actually not that rough, as far as Crushing goes.

If we rose by another hundred meters, though, even I would be having a bad time."

'...Good to know.'

At this point, Sunny was regretting that they had not climbed on the griffin and dove into the Sky Below.

The Chained Isles was a dangerous place, and the Nightmare Creatures living on them were fearsome and powerful beyond belief.

However, the creatures living under the islands were much, much worse. Sunny had seen them from afar a couple of times, and the mere memory of those horrors was enough to send a shudder running through his entire body.

Still, they could have fought their way through… probably…

It would have been better than this diabolical torture, for sure.

'Argh…'

But there was nothing he could do now except grit his teeth and endure. Minute after minute, hour after hour. Sunny couldn't even think properly because of how terrible the pressure of the boundless skies was. All he could do was suffer silently and stare at the Ivory Tower.

His shadow, on the other hand, was having a great time. It didn't move, reluctant to get noticed by Master Roan, but he could feel it stare at him gloatingly.

'Bastard… I'm going to wrap you around the Ordinary Rock and make it scream without rest for twenty-four hours straight… let's see who's going to be gloating then…'

The shadow hesitated for a bit, then awkwardly pretended to be interested in something else and looked away.

'Yeah, that's right...'

Somewhere in the forest, another tree exploded with a loud crack.

Sunny tried to turn his head to look in that direction, but it demanded too much effort. He didn't have to worry about being attacked by Nightmare Creatures in this helpless state, anyway. They were currently hiding in their lairs, enduring the Crushing the same way he was.

Who could fight under this hellish pressure?

Sunny felt as if there was a mountain on his chest. Every breath demanded his utmost effort to make. His whole being ached, and his vision had become blurry. Exhausted, he closed his eyes and circulated the shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to keep his slowly breaking body going.

'Damn it… I'll be late to wake up, won't I? When were they going to call… in the morning? Such an important call, and I'm about to miss it…'

He was starting to feel really hurt when the blessed sound of rattling chains finally reached his ears once again.

'Oh, thank gods…'

After about four hours, the island had finally begun to move again, entering its descent phase. Little by little, the crushing pressure began to grow weaker.

Master Roan sighed with relief by his side.

"The worst part is over. Just wait a little bit more, kid. You're almost there."

Sunny glanced at the older man and sighed. He used to hate it when people called him kid, but not anymore, at least not as much. He just felt a little wistful.

He didn't feel like a kid. Not for a long time now... not since coming back from the Forgotten Shore.

A dozen long and torturous minutes later, the island descended enough for them to move, and then slowly stand up.

The Crushing was over.

Chapter-383: Cowardly Researcher

Sunny slowly rolled on his stomach, then rose to his knees. He was breathing heavily, and his whole body felt as if it had just gone through a meat grinder. Master Roan, on the other hand, looked almost unperturbed.

The rider was already on his feet, tying the blue scarf around his neck with a relaxed expression on his face.

The forest around them let out an almost human sigh of relief. The ancient trees creaked and cracked, raising their branches back toward the sun. Those that had broken remained on the ground, adding to the nearly impenetrable layer of deadfall.

Sunny glanced at the older man with a bit of envy, then stood up and tried to shake off his exhaustion. After spending a few minutes resting and drinking greedily from the Endless Spring, he almost felt alive again. Glancing at the tall man, he asked:

"How are you able to fly up there on your griffin? I mean… no offense, but that seems like something only a crazy person would do."

Roan laughed.

"I don't rise too high unless I really have to. Usually, you can fly above the descending islands without experiencing too much pressure. After a while, you develop a sense of how much your body can handle, and for how long."

He massaged his broad shoulders and added, a note of pride in his voice:

"Plus, I am a Master, after all. I can withstand much more than an

Awakened would. You did exceptionally well, however. To be honest, I was pretty sure that I would have to abandon my patrol to bring your bleeding body back to the Sanctuary at full speed, then throw it into the Gateway. I guess it's true what they say about you Forgotten Shore kids."

Sunny blinked a couple of times and asked cautiously:

"...What do they say?"

The older man smiled.

"Tough as nails, disturbingly indifferent to pain and fear, strong… almost scary. Scary children, that was the exact phrase I heard."

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then scoffed.

"Indifferent to pain and fear? What nonsense. I pride myself on being a coward — as one should. What's wrong with being a coward? Fear keeps people alive, while bravery gets them killed. As for pain, no thank you.

I have been beaten, burned, crushed, drowned, cut, stabbed, pierced, bitten, chewed, and gutted enough times for several lifetimes already."

As Master Roan gave him a strange look, Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… what?"

The tall man shook his head, then scratched his chin and said in a wondering tone:

"No, nothing. It's just... if that is true, Sunless… then what are you doing here on the Chained Isles? Shouldn't you be having a nice time in a safe place like Bastion?"

Sunny looked away in embarrassment, then coughed.

"That… uh… there are several reasons for that, actually. Not the least of which is that…"

He looked side to side, then lowered his voice and said in a gravely serious tone:

"...You won't believe it, but the government actually pays you money for writing down things about the Dream Realm. And since the Chained Isles are largely unexplored, they pay me premium for going around dusty ruins here and scribbling down a thing or two. I am technically a contracted researcher, believe it or not!"

He grinned and watched as Master Roan stared at him with an incredulous expression. After a while, the older man said:

"You are a strange fellow, you know that?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Huh? Everyone knows that, I think. Anyway… don't tell anyone about what I've just said. I don't want the competition."

The tall man blinked a couple of times, then smiled:

"No problem. Do you need me to take you back to the Sanctuary? Or will you be fine returning on your own?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then said:

"I'll be fine. It's not that far, anyway. If I make haste, I'll be back before morning and go straight back to the real world. I have business to attend to there, actually."

Master Roan nodded and patted Sunny on the shoulder.

"Alright. Then I'll be on my way. It's been nice meeting you, Sunless. If you need anything in the future, don't hesitate to find me in the Sanctuary."

With that, he summoned his Echo. A sea of white sparks appeared out of thin air and swirled, slowly turning into the figure of the mighty griffin. The winged beast towered above Sunny like a gargantuan mix between a lion, an eagle, and a pure nightmare. Slowly, it lowered its head, staring at him with two beautiful, inhuman eyes.

Its beak looked about as fearsome and terrifying as that of a Spire Messenger.

Sunny tensed a little and took a couple of steps back, prepared to dissipate into the shadows at any moment.

He didn't really think that Master Roan would suddenly attack him, but being paranoid was better than being dead.

The tall man summoned his armor, then easily jumped on the griffin's back and raised a fist to bid Sunny farewell. In the next moment, the Echo stretched its wings and pushed itself off the ground, sending a squall of hurricane wind in all directions.

Sunny struggled to remain on his feet, and then looked as the griffin flew into the distance. Slowly, a friendly expression disappeared from his face.

'Well, what do you know…'

The famed Master had turned out to be a rather pleasant person. Granted, he was a Legacy by marriage, and not by birth… still, Sunny had expected to be treated with a lot more disdain and contempt, at best hidden behind a mask of false courtesy.

Come to think of it, the Saint governing the Chained Isles herself was pretty down to earth, if a bit cold. Not that Sunny had a lot of opportunities to interact with her after that first day when she had brought him to the Sanctuary.

With a sigh, he walked over to the carcass of the monstrous wolf and sent it flying over the edge of the island with a frustrated push.

The corpse of the abominable beast plummeted down and soon disappeared into the darkness of the Sky Below.

Making sure that nothing appeared from beneath the island to snatch it, Sunny lingered on the edge for a couple of minutes, then sighed…

And jumped into the bottomless abyss himself.

Chapter-384: Traversing the Islands

Falling through the boundless blue skies with the wind whistling in his ears, Sunny threw his hands to the sides and summoned the Dark Wing. As the translucent Memory weaved itself from light behind his back, he shifted his weight and allowed the air resistance to push him off course, effectively turning left.

A few seconds after that, he activated the enchantment of his cloak and slowed down his fall, simultaneously turning the downward momentum into a forward push.

In these past two months, Sunny had become somewhat proficient in navigating the sky.

Cutting a smooth arc in the air, he swiftly approached one of the gargantuan chains connecting the Forest Island to another, flew above it for a few minutes, and landed nimbly on one of the massive links.

The giant chain swayed lightly beneath his feet. Somewhere behind him, it rose and merged with the soil of the island. In front of him, there was a vast expanse of empty heavens. Here on the border to the Sky Below, it was currently twilight. The chain stretched into the distance, disappearing into the darkness of the void a few hundred meters away.

As the Dark Wing turned from a blur back into a transparent cloak, Sunny sighed and walked forward. Each link of the heavenly chain was as wide as a road, so he didn't need to be afraid of falling off. Approaching the connection between two links, Sunny either jumped down or glided up to the next one.

Walking across the length of the chain that was drawn between the

bottomless abyss below and the boundless sky above, he soon left the light of the sun behind and entered into the eternal darkness of the Below. Here, there was no wind and no sound, only silence. If not for the swaying of the chain, Sunny would have thought that he had entered a completely new world.

A myriad of ghostly lights were burning somewhere far below, pretending to be stars.

Making sure that no one was watching him, Sunny lingered for a few moments… and then dove into the iron surface of the chain. His body turned into an incorporeal shadow and merged with the darkness enshrouding it.

Here in the Sky Below, he was in his natural element, after all.

Sunny couldn't travel through the empty darkness itself, but the chains were covered by an impenetrable veil of shadows. He could swim through them for as long as he had essence to spare, safe from the terrible creatures that lived on the dark side of the Chained Isles.

Rushing forward with terrible speed, Sunny slid over the surface of the chain and flew through the darkness like a ghost. He went faster and then faster still, circling around the chain several times and leaving the Forest Island far behind.

Covering the distance to the next isle in mere minutes, he escaped from the shadows the moment the sunlight touched the iron chain once again and shot upward in a spin. The Dark Wing turned into a blur, pushing him even further up.

Sunny soared above the floating island and then glided smoothly to its surface, landing on solid ground with a light step.

This one was much different from the one where he had fought the monstrous wolves. Instead of a forest of twisted trees, the isle was covered by jagged rocks, with an ancient ruin standing lonesomely in its center. Sunny had explored the massive structure already, and wasn't interested in visiting it again.

Jumping from one shadow to another, he avoided the Nightmare

Creatures populating the island and soon approached its other edge.

Technically, from here, he only needed to cross two more isles to reach the Sanctuary. However, one of those isles was home to a dreadful and utterly terrifying Corrupted Monster, so he was going to have to make a big detour.

Sunny looked at the sun, and then jumped off the edge once again.

Just like that, he traveled from one island to another for a few hours. When possible, Sunny turned into a shadow and rushed along the lengths of heavenly chains, then emerged from the darkness and traversed the islands themselves on foot.

Each island was different from another. Some were desolate and bleak, some covered by grass and vegetation. One was full of beautiful white flowers, while another hid a clear, tranquil lake. A few were covered by ash and flames, while several were covered by the ruins that some ancient civilization had left behind.

If there was one thing that united all of them, it was that each was dangerous in its own way.

The desolate islands were home to swarms of monstrous, gluttonous ants. The grass covered the maws of giant abominations that hid beneath, waiting for prey to step into their trap. The vegetation was predatory and deadly if one wasn't careful to not get too close. The beautiful white flowers could put a person to sleep from which they would never wake up.

The tranquil lake was home to a creature so terrifying that Sunny did not even dare to approach its clear waters.

And these ones were on the safer side, as far as the Chained Isles went. Due to their proximity to the Sanctuary, they were well explored, and anything dangerous enough to pose threat to the Citadel had long been destroyed by Saint Tyris herself. Sunny had been to these islands already, too, so he knew his way around them.

Each was either descending or ascending. The former were easier to cross, while the latter forced him to walk while suffering from the

early stages of the Crushing. If an island he wanted to use was too high, Sunny had to change his plan and seek out another way.

After a while, his reserve of shadow essence became dangerously low. Knowing that he will have to make a stop, Sunny chose a relatively safe island and headed toward it.

Gliding to the surface, Sunny tiredly dismissed the Dark Wing and looked around.

The island he was currently standing on was rather close to the Sanctuary, and usually empty of any Nightmare Creatures. However, it was wise to make sure.

Sending his shadows in different directions to scout for potential danger, Sunny sat on the ground and summoned the Endless Spring. When his thirst was satiated, he crossed his legs, put his hands on his knees, and closed his eyes, concentrating on the coils of the Soul Serpent.

With a part of his mind observing the world through the shadows and another concentrated on hastening the accumulation of shadow essence, he meditated for a while, and then suddenly opened his eyes.

One of the shadows had noticed something interesting.

Chapter-385: Iron Hand Island

The island Sunny was resting on was a strange one. It was rather large and covered in soft grass, with ancient stone columns protruding from the ground here and there. Most of them had long toppled and been shattered to pieces by some unknown disaster. The ground itself was full of depressions and generally uneven, as if it had served as a battlefield for giants once.

The reason why Sunny had come up with such a metaphor was not coincidental. The main feature of the island was situated at its center, and appeared to be a giant, rusty metal hand. Hence, the isle was unimaginatively called the Iron Hand Island.

It was well known to the Awakened anchored in the Sanctuary because very few Nightmare Creatures ever came here, and thus, many humans used it to rest during their journeys.

However, today, Sunny wasn't the only visitor to the peaceful island.

A rather ugly monstrosity lay dead in the shadow of the giant iron hand, its blood forming a large pool. It had a body like that of a snake, two powerful hands protruding from a human-like torso, a head with a long and toothy muzzle, and two leathery wings.

From the looks of it, the creature had landed on the island due to heavy injuries, and then succumbed to the most recent Crushing. Its body seemed broken and flattened, with sharp bone splinters protruding from the torn scales.

Sunny's interest was naturally piqued, because it wasn't every day that he stumbled on free soul shards. Additionally, and more intriguing, the shadow had noticed something glinting on the ground near one of the abomination's hands.

'Huh…'

Standing up, Sunny looked around, and then headed to the center of the island.

Soon, he reached the rusty metal arm and dove into the shadows, emerging on top of it. Standing a good ten meters above the ground, he stared at the carcass of the dead Nightmare Creature to make sure that the shadow didn't miss anything.

…Everything seemed to be fine.

With a shrug, Sunny jumped down and landed softly on the grass near the massive monster. Walking around it, he approached the spot where the abomination's hand lay on the ground, its five long fingers ending in terrifying claws.

"Gee. You were a scary one, weren't you?"

He didn't need to wonder about who had done the monster in. On the Chained Isles, Nightmare Creatures constantly fought each other. Winged ones like this one were often caught by the inhabitants of the dark side, torn to pieces, and devoured.

This one had been relatively lucky, all things considered.

Bending down, Sunny picked up the small object that seemed to have fallen out of the creature's hand and stared at it with a dubious expression.

"...A coin?"

Indeed, he was holding a heavy golden coin. Which didn't make any sense.

Nightmare Creatures were not exactly known for participating in commerce, and humans did not use coins. If they needed to trade, they either bartered with suitable items or used credits — of course, credits didn't exist in the Dream Realm, but the transaction would be honored when both parties returned to the real world.

So where could a gold coin come from?

Sunny stared at the coin for a while, then turned it around. There

was a depiction of an archaic ship on one of its sides, with a tall mast that had an actual tree growing around it. A beautiful human face stared at him from the other side, a carefree smile on its lips.

The person had high cheekbones, long hair, and exquisite features. Sunny couldn't say if they were a man or a woman, just that they seem rather charming. There was a crescent moon drawn on their forehead, and… well, that was about it.

Sunny studied the coin some more, and then thought despondently:

'That thing is definitely cursed, right?'

It just had to be. What else was he supposed to think after finding a mysterious coin near the corpse of a monster that had died a violent death?

…But it didn't seem to be cursed.

Sunny had a rather good intuition about these things. He also had the sight of a person who had inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage.

Looking under the surface of the coin, Sunny expected to see a malevolent spellweave, or at least something strange, but there was nothing.

From the looks of it, the coin… was just a coin.

The only strangeness about it was that it seemed a little bit warm to the touch.

"Huh…"

Teacher Julius would have been delighted if he brought him a sketch of a genuine Dream Realm coin. Cultural artifacts like this were few and far between. It wouldn't result in Sunny receiving any contribution points, but the old man was easy to please.

With a shrug, Sunny shoved the coin into his pack and turned to the dead monster.

"Let's see how many shards you're hiding, ugly lizard…"

He summoned the Moonlight Shard, enhanced it with two shadows, and cut into the tough hide of the Nightmare Creature. For a while, luck was on his side. He quickly retrieved two bright soul shards… so quickly, in fact, that Sunny grew sure that there had to be a third one inside the carcass.

"A demon, huh?"

That was where his luck ended. The body of the demon was too heavily damaged, so when he tried to fish out the third crystal, its stomach burst open and spilled its contents all over the ground.

"Argh! Curses!"

Sunny was so disgusted by the idea of being doused in the putrid slimy mass that he instinctively teleported a few meters away.

Then, he tilted his head and stared down.

Covered in repulsive, acidic liquid, three more coins — as well as something that resembled a piece of a wooden chest — lay in the quickly melting grass.

'Did this guy… try to eat a treasure chest?'

Sunny shook his head, walked around the disgusting mess, and quickly retrieved the last soul shard.

Since golden coins were rather useless to him and he already had one to sketch, he had no intention of retrieving the rest.

'No thank you…'

By that time, he had recovered enough shadow essence to return to the Sanctuary, so nothing was holding him on the island anymore.

Throwing one last look at the giant metal hand and wondering what terrible strike could have separated it from the rest of the theoretical giant, he turned away and walked toward the edge of the island.

The sun was already setting, so he didn't have a lot of time left to return to the Citadel and use the Gateway before the morning came.

Chapter-386: Sanctuary of Noctis

Soon, Sunny was walking on the last chain he had to traverse as he approached the Sanctuary of Noctis.

By then, it was already night. Up above, the pale disk of the crescent moon shone softly, its light reflecting off the white walls of the Ivory Tower. Countless stars shimmered on the dark velvet tapestry of the night sky. Without the light pollution that the giant city where Sunny had grown up produced, they were beautiful and bright.

There had not been any stars on the Forgotten Shore, as well, so this sight was still new and breathtaking to him.

Now that it was night, the border between the Sky Above and the Sky Below was almost invisible. The empty void beneath the Isles had stars of its own, so it seemed like the reflection of the real sky during these hours. The only difference between them was that it lacked both the moon and the ethereal silhouette of a graceful white tower floating through the clouds.

The chain swayed lightly as Sunny walked. He felt reluctant to use Shadow Step this close to the Sanctuary and enjoyed the sight of the night sky, the smell of clean air, and the cool embrace of the wind. So he tended to complete this last part of the return journey on foot.

…Even hell could be beautiful, sometimes.

A few minutes later, Sunny heard the murmur of flowing water and knew that the Sanctuary was already close.

The Citadel that served most Awakened of the Chained Isles as home was situated on a tiny island of its own. That island, however, was rather anomalous: unlike all others, it never rose and never fell,

always remaining at a stable height, away from the torturous pressure of the Crushing.

There was a grass field, and in its center, massive menhirs stood in a perfect circle, which encompassed another, smaller one. This larger circle formed the outer wall of the Citadel, while the smaller one formed the inner.

Inside the circle, there was a tranquil park with a pool of clear water in its middle. A path of stones led to a small island at the center of the pool, where, in the shade of an ancient tree, an altar cut from a solid piece of white marble stood.

The altar had three special things about it.

The first one was an obsidian knife that lay on its surface. The knife did not seem very special, with the exception of the fact that no one — not even Saints — could lift it even by a centimeter from the altar's surface.

The second special thing about the altar was that it appeared to be, itself, the Gateway. One simply had to touch it to be transported back to the real world. Once anchored to it, the Awakened would appear near the altar when they fell asleep in reality.

The third thing was that a seemingly endless stream of water flowed from the altar, feeding the pool that surrounded it. No one knew where the water came from or why the altar produced it, just that it was cold, sweet, and safe to drink.

Seven streams flowed out of the pool and eventually fell over the edges of the small island, turning into water mist in the wind. On a bright day, the whole Sanctuary was surrounded by rainbows.

It was the murmur of these waterfalls that Sunny had heard as he approached the Citadel.

Using the Dark Wing to glide upward and land on the soft grass of the island, he walked over to a stone post that stood nearby and rang the bronze bell that hung on it. This was to let the watchmen know that he was a human and not a Nightmare Creature that needed to be

destroyed.

Soon, a whistle came out of the darkness, and Sunny walked forward on a path that led to the towering menhirs.

A few minutes later, he had walked between two massive stones and entered the Sanctuary of Noctis.

No one really knew who Noctis was, and why this place was called in their honor… if that name even belonged to a living creature. It was just what the Spell called this place, so humans followed suit.

In any case, the space between the two rings of menhirs had been made into a place for the Awakened to rest and recuperate between their ventures into the wild expanse of the Chained Isles.

The White Feather clan had built walls to close the spaces between the standing stones, and recruited several people with useful utility Aspects to make living conditions better for those who chose to come here or were sent to this region by the Spell.

Currently, there were about two hundred Awakened populating the Sanctuary, which was enough to keep it functioning and safe.

This late at night, most people were either sleeping, resting, or had already returned to the real world, so Sunny did not meet anyone as he headed toward his assigned living quarters.

Like everybody else here, he was assigned a small room after becoming anchored to the Sanctuary. It was situated near one of two entrances, so he didn't have to walk for a long time.

Entering the room, Sunny quickly took off his pack and placed his trophies — a scattering of soul shards, a few weird-looking fruits, and the golden coin — into a chest standing near the bed. Then he threw the pack on the floor, lingered for a few moments, and left.

Usually, he would have stayed until the morning and went to either the kitchens or the improvised marketplace at the park to trade the shards for Memories or credits, chat with other Awakened to learn the latest news and important information about the Isles, or simply relax… but today, he had to hurry to the real world.

Entering the park, Sunny approached the deep pool of clear water and stepped onto the first stone of the path that led to the Altar Island.

Soon, he was standing in front of the white altar, surrounded by the tranquil sound of rustling leaves and running water. Glancing at the obsidian dagger, Sunny resisted the urge to try and lift it. He had already done so many times before, all with no result whatsoever.

'...Maybe one day.'

With a sigh, he took a step forward and placed his hand on the altar.

The marble felt cool to the touch.

In the next moment, the darkness of the night was momentarily illuminated by a flash of ethereal blue light. When it dissipated, there was no one standing under the branches of the ancient tree.

Sunny had left the Dream Realm and returned to the real world.

Chapter-387: Withered Flowers

Sunny opened his eyes in the cool cradle of the sleeping pod. The lid was already sliding away, and the lights in the room were gradually turning brighter. The panoramic wall in front of him opened to a view of one of the Academy parks.

The eastern horizon was already painted lilac by the rising sun, but the world was still shrouded in darkness.

'...Made it.'

With a sigh, he rose from the pod and lowered his feet to the cold floor.

These first moments after leaving the Dream Realm were still strange to him. It just… it just seemed weird to be able to escape it so easily, without having to fight through a sea of monsters and struggle against terror, desperation, and pain. How could something so meaningful be so simple?

And yet, it was. In the past two months, coming and going from the Dream Realm had almost become a routine for him. Not that he had done it as often as most Awakened did.

Standing up, Sunny grimaced, then massaged his shoulders and glanced at the sleeping pod darkly.

Now that he was an Awakened, the Academy had granted him a personal living space in one of the dormitories. These quarters were much the same as the room he had lived in during his preparations to enter the Dream Realm for the first time, but with one significant difference: there was a smaller room adjacent to the main one, housing a humble meditation space and an individual sleeping pod.

The problem was, that pod was not at all as advanced and state-of-

the-art as the ones used for the Sleepers. It did its job fine as long as an Awakened remained in the Dream Realm for about eight to twelve hours, as most of them did. However, Sunny was in the habit of spending much, much more time there.

His recent adventure, for example, had lasted three whole days… he had to work hard to not fall behind, after all. As a result, his muscles felt sore and heavy.

Circulating essence through his body to chase away the remnants of sleep, Sunny walked to the bathroom and got into the shower. As streams of water caressed his skin and flowed down the scales of the black serpent coiling around his lithe body, he sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

At least his mind felt refreshed. Visiting the Dream Realm was not exactly equal to good sleep, but it was somewhat similar. Mental fatigue still accumulated little by little, but it was easy to remove by meditating or actually sleeping on the other side of the Gateway. Few Awakened ever did, however, since no place there was really completely safe.

Exiting the shower sometime later, Sunny finally felt wide awake and full of energy. He dressed himself, sat at the table, and quickly compiled a report about his recent exploration. Then, he picked up the communicator and checked its log.

No missed calls, a few messages from Effie with photos of all the delicious food she was eating and several memetic jokes of questionable nature, and a few more from Kai, describing his experiences in Bastion.

Sunny waited for a bit, then sighed and put the communicator down.

"Time for breakfast."

Commanding one of the shadows to wrap itself around his body so that he appeared like a normal person, Sunny left his room and headed out.

On the way to the cafeteria, he met a few other Awakened. No one

paid him too much attention, though. In recent months, the images and True Names of Cassie, Kai, and especially Effie had been plastered all over the media, but luckily, he had avoided becoming a poster boy for the government's insatiable propaganda machine.

As the result, random strangers had no idea who he was, which suited Sunny just fine.

Entering the cafeteria, he got himself a full tray of food, sat at one of the tables, and placed the communicator on its surface.

The call was supposed to come any minute now.

He enjoyed a decadently delicious breakfast in peace and quiet, glancing at the communicator from time to time. No one bothered him, and there was no danger to be worried about.

A content smile found its way to his lips.

'Ah. Life is good…'

Finally, the communicator rang.

Sunny answered the call and listened to the respectful voice on the other side of it.

"Everything is ready? Wonderful. So, when can I… oh, really? Well… great! Then I will… be there at noon? Right.

See you later, then."

Finishing the call, he put the communicator down and stared into the distance for a long time, a strange look on his face.

After receiving the contribution points for his Forgotten Shore report and making some money by selling soul shards to other Awakened on the Chained Isles, Sunny had done something that he had never thought that he would be able to do in this life.

…He had bought a home.

A nice, beautiful home in the district of the city with clean air and

green lawns.

And now, after several long weeks of waiting, everything was finally ready for him to move in.

Looking down at his cantankerous shadow, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then smiled.

"...I think we've made it, buddy. We really, really did."

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The person in charge of renovating his home and bringing it to the desired specifications was going to meet him there at noon, so Sunny had a few hours of free time to kill.

He wandered around the parks for a bit. Now that the spring had come, the air was warm and pleasant. The melodic drip-drop of melting snow disturbed the peaceful silence of the early morning, making Sunny feel balanced and relaxed. Even the shadow seemed to enjoy this tranquil landscape.

Eventually, he visited one of the kiosks scattered around the Academy and spent a bit of credits to buy a bouquet of fresh flowers.

Then, Sunny found himself standing in front of the hospital complex.

With a sigh, he lowered his head and walked through the automatic doors.

Using an elevator to reach one of the lowest levels, he passed several increasingly strict security checks and approached an unremarkable white door.

Inside, it was cool and dark.

Changing the withered flowers with fresh ones, he lingered for a bit, then sat on a chair that stood near the softly glowing sleeping pod.

Entombed within, a young woman with silver hair was dreaming soundly, her face pale and unmoving.

"...Hey, Nephis. How have you been?"

Chapter-388: Vigil

The was no one in the room besides the two of them. Well… Nephis wasn't really there, either. In a sense, Sunny was alone.

In more senses than one, really.

There were two small tables standing on both sides of the sleeping pod, each bearing a vase with fresh flowers. Sunny only ever changed flowers in one of the vases, while Cassie tended to the other. They had yet to bump into each other while visiting Neph after that first fateful day, though, which suited Sunny fine.

He didn't really want to see the blind girl now… or ever again.

Glancing at Changing Star, Sunny sighed and kept his mouth shut. He didn't know what kinds of recording equipment were installed in the room, so his one-sided conversations with Nephis had to happen in the safety of his mind.

'I've just returned from the Dream Realm. Spent a whole three days there, exploring ruins and hunting down a few Nightmare Creatures. My shadow fragments… well, you already know. I've been working hard to not let you leave me completely in the dust. Oh… I met a Master from the White Feather clan yesterday. He seems like a nice enough guy.

You would have liked him, I think.'

He paused for a few moments and wondered if this was considered crazy behavior… talking to a person that wasn't really there, pretending that they were. Maybe it was. But despite how much Sunny hated to admit it, he wasn't as fine and stable as he pretended to be.

He was angry, guilt-ridden… and lonely. He missed Nephis much

more than he had ever expected. Out there on the Forgotten Shore, she had somehow become a fundamental part of his life. It was strange to exist without her occupying a place in the same world as him.

…Painful.

He missed Cassie, too. Or rather, the version of her that had lived in his mind before everything they had turned to ashes. He missed their friendship, their camaraderie, their trust in each other... things that had been broken and lost.

Sunny sighed.

'You know, these days I often think about the time we spent in the Labyrinth. The three of us. It was a… a simpler time, don't you think? A wonderful time. It seemed so terrible back then, but now… now, I miss it a lot. I wonder if you do, too.'

He grimaced, then looked away.

'Anyway… what else? Oh. That house I bought is ready. Kai and Effie are doing fine. They are both very busy, though. I… hear that Cas is doing well, too.

She had become the leader of those Forgotten Shore Awakened who remained independent. People are calling them the Fire Keepers. Funny, right?'

Sunny lingered for a while, gathering his thoughts.

'...I have visited your mom, by the way. I remember that you didn't like the thought of her being alone, so I went to see her. She is fine, too. Well… I mean, you know. For a Hollow. Oh, and the funniest part…'

He looked around, then thought:

'Do you remember how you told us that you wanted to dye your hair? You won't believe it, but I actually bought a little Memory that allows me to change the color of my hair at will. Not because of you, it's just something that I needed for a thing I'm about to do. Still, I think that

it's sort of hilarious.'

Nephis remained still and absent, her ivory face looking lifeless in the white glow of the sleeping pod. He gritted his teeth.

'...Where are you? How are you doing? Are you hurt? Are you fucking happy?! I imagine that you would be, free of everything, with nothing to do but slaughter Nightmare Creatures and battle against the thing you hate the most.'

Sunny looked down and clenched his fists, then remained still for a long time.

'Are you... coming back?'

There was no answer.

He sat by Changing Star's side for a while, staring at her still face. Then, he nodded heavily and stood up.

"Alright. Figures. I'll see you later, then."

With that, Sunny turned around and left.

***

Exiting the Academy, Sunny lingered for a bit, then turned around and looked back.

The massive red gates looked very different from how they used to, back when he and Nephis walked through them sixteen months ago. The space in front of them had been empty then, but now, it was filled with tens of thousands of burning candles.

These candles were an altar to Changing Star.

After the survivors of the Forgotten Shore had returned to the real world, their story spread like wildfire and captured humanity's attention for a few weeks. Both the independent media and the government propaganda machine added fuel to the fire, spinning it as an inspirational epic of human resilience, heroism… and sacrifice.

And Nephis, of course, was the protagonist of that epic.

Most of the Forgotten Shore Awakened were her willing apostles, after all. In their hearts, she was their savior. They were also under the impression that Changing Star had become trapped in the Dream Realm in order to give them a chance to escape.

Their voices fell into fertile soil. Nephis already had the established mythos of the Immortal Flame clan to raise her into the spotlight of glory, and with her extraordinary accomplishments on the Forgotten Shore, it only grew brighter. The thing that really elevated and exalted her, however, was something else. It was martyrdom.

People loved nothing more than a martyr.

Just like Sunny had said, a person had to die to become a true hero. Changing Star, however, had done something strange. She was now, somehow, neither dead nor alive, which only made the whole thing more gripping and emotional.

Nephis had become a martyr without actually dying.

...Which was, coincidentally, very fitting, considering her clan's name.

All of humanity was now entranced by the story of the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flame clan, the heiress to two most prominent warriors in human history, who had been thrust into hell, stormed the citadel of a Fallen Terror that ruled it, and fought the creature off long enough for a hundred Sleepers to escape back to the real world, staying behind to ensure their survival.

From the outside, she seemed like a paragon of humanity.

Sunny didn't know who came up with the idea of placing candles near the gates of the Academy, but it was rather ingenious. People seemed to believe that the Immortal Flame would not be extinguished as long as at least one candle continued to burn for Changing Star.

So the Academy had unexpectedly become a place of pilgrimage for thousands of humans who wished for her to do the impossible once

again and return alive.

The idea was so poignant that even Sunny himself had felt compelled to light a candle a couple of times.

'...Zealots.'

With a dismissive shake of his head, he turned around and walked away, leaving the sea of candles behind.

None of them really knew Nephis. Only he did.

She didn't need their candles to escape the Dream Realm.

Perhaps it was the Dream Realm that needed help escaping from her.

Chapter-389: A Place to Call His Own

Sunny spent some time in a crowded carriage of a public train. Since personal transport vehicles were rare, expensive, and demanded a special government license to purchase, most people in the city used public transportation to move around. Magnetic trains, usually simply called trams, were the cheapest and most popular form of it.

During his time in the outskirts, Sunny rarely had a reason to use one, but when he did, people didn't pay him any attention. Sometimes they even went out of their way to not notice him.

But now, things seemed to have changed. Sunny had his eyes closed, observing the carriage through the shadow in case there was danger. There wasn't… however, he was surprised to notice that people, especially young women, threw curious glances at him from time to time.

'Huh… is the Soul Serpent showing?'

But no, his sleeves hid the coils of the Shadow completely.

'Strange. Must be the clothes, then.'

Sunny had not ventured out of the Academy a lot during the past two months, but on one of those expeditions, he had bought himself some unassuming, but pricey civilian clothes. According to Kai, they were "understated" and "stylish", whatever that meant. Sunny basically just went for the only comfortable thing the store had in dark colors.

He sighed.

'That just shows how shallow people are. A simple change of wardrobe, and suddenly, I'm at the center of attention. Why are girls

so materialistic?'

…To be fair, many guys stared at him, too.

By the time Sunny reached his stop, he was a bit flustered. Leaving the crowded train behind, he sighed with relief, hid his hands in his pockets, and walked out of the familiar tram terminal.

The part of town he came to was somewhat near its center, as far removed from the outskirts as one could imagine. It was peaceful, quiet, and green.

The air was almost as fresh as that of the Dream Realm.

The houses in this district were also the opposite of the human hives Sunny was accustomed to — weirdly, they were all very low, no more than two or three stories high. The ground itself rose and fell in artificial tiers, each street existing on its own wide terrace. Out here, the snow was already gone, revealing beautiful lawns and greenery. The whole district looked like a garden.

Obviously, not everyone could allow themselves to live here. Most of the locals were either reasonably wealthy or worked for the government… however, as far as citizens went, they were not of the highest ranks. There were other, much more affluent districts in the city, and the real elites — as well as most Awakened — lived there.

But that was one of the things Sunny liked about this place. He could do without being around other Awakened all day, every day. Or anyone, really.

It took him around fifteen minutes to walk from the terminal to the desired address. Of course, Sunny could have reached it much faster by jumping through the shadows, but he preferred to not use his Abilities outside of the Dream Realm and the Academy. It made him feel more human.

Finally, he stopped in front of the home that was going to be his, and stared at it for a few minutes.

The house in front of him was two stories high, with grey walls and a slanting tile roof. It had a synthwood porch, a lawn, and a big

window opening to the view of a spacious living room. There was even a garage for a PTV, and a hedge fence to separate it from the neighboring homes.

…It was like something out of a fairy-tale.

'Extravagant…'

"Ahem… Awakened Sunless? Sir?"

Sunny was aware, of course, that a PTV had just parked nearby and that a man got out of it, approaching him from behind. He was just too consumed by the weight of the moment to show it.

Turning around, he glanced at the person who called out for him.

It was a short, overweight man wearing a very expensive tailored suit and an antique luxury watch. Despite his outward appearance, the man was full of confidence and had a wide, polished, professional smile plastered to his face.

Sunny stared at him with a dubious expression, then said:

"...Lanard, right?"

The man — who was the representative of the agency responsible for outfitting Sunny's new home — nodded with enthusiasm.

"That's me. Ah, the fact that you have remembered my name is very flattering, sir. Really."

With that, he gestured to the home and smiled.

"How do you like it?"

Sunny hesitated, then feigned indifference and shrugged.

"It's fine, I guess."

Lanard lingered for a moment, then smiled even wider.

"Of course, a person of your caliber must be accustomed to much more luxurious accommodations. But I can assure you, you won't be

disappointed by our work! This home might not be as high class as what you're used to, but we did everything per your specifications.

Although… I must admit, your choice of location gave us a challenge, especially with the need to keep the exact nature of the modifications discreet."

Sunny kept a straight face and tried to understand what the hell Lanard was talking about, and who he thought Sunny was.

To be honest, when he had decided to buy a home, he just contacted Master Jet, told her where he wanted the house to be located and a couple of things he hoped to fit inside, and instead of giving him advice on how to proceed, she simply arranged everything with a couple of phone calls.

And now, here he was.

Meanwhile, Lanard glanced at him with a bit of curiosity, hesitated for a couple of moments, and then asked cautiously:

"By the way… if you don't mind me asking, sir… how does this beautiful house stack against your previous place of residence? I am interested from a purely professional standpoint, of course. Think of it as a client survey!"

Sunny looked at the cozy grey home, thought for a bit, and then answered honestly:

"Well… my previous place was about a hundred times bigger, built mostly out of natural stone and marble, with antique wooden furniture and a very special secret dungeon. Oh, and security was taken care of by a Fallen Devil."

Lanard stared at him for a while with the same wide smile.

His face, however, had slowly turned grey.

After a while, he coughed a couple of times and said hoarsely:

"Wonderful… that's wonderful…ahem. Shall we take a look inside?"

Chapter-390: Is My Castle

The interior of the home was tasteful and minimalist, governed by a design philosophy that seemed stylish, spacious... and a little bit empty.

The first floor contained a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, a pantry, a bathroom, and a guest bedroom. Everything was furnished and fully stocked, including a refrigerator that was stuffed with all kinds of expensive food.

Lanard looked around with a sense of pride and went on a long tirade about all the hidden security features the unassuming house actually possessed.

There were thick plates of armored alloy hiding behind the siding panels, the wide windows were outfitted with titanium shutters that could come down at a moment's notice, and both air and water filters could withstand not only the usual environmental toxins, but also most known forms of biochemical threats.

Such extensive security measures might have seemed like overkill, but in fact, even mundane humans strived to turn their homes into compact fortresses. No one knew when the next Gate would open, and how close to them it would be. Even though most homeowners were never going to use these protective features, having them made for a big quality of life difference.

Lanard spent a weirdly long amount of time describing all the lighting fixtures his agency had installed, his voice bursting with enthusiasm. It seemed that the man had a thing about designer lamps. Sunny didn't have the heart to tell him that he would not be using any of them, most of the time. He could see perfectly well in the dark, after all.

"...the house is connected to the city electrical grid, but there's

obviously an autonomous energy source for emergencies. Spelltech, of course. Power units are easily accessible for purchase and last for a very long time…"

By spelltech, he meant that the autonomous generator was built by combining modern technology with Awakened powers. The power units it required had to be either recharged or created by someone with a suitable Utility Aspect. Devices such as this were considered to be a luxury for the commoners, but in fact, a very large part of the city's infrastructure functioned on spelltech.

Not everything in the world was created by the Awakened, but almost all industries required their participation in one way or another. Even the air filtration systems Sunny's mother used to assemble in an underground factory on the outskirts contained fiber grown by one of the Nightmare Spell carriers.

That was why, while Utility Aspects were often useless in a fight, people who possessed them were so valued by society.

…Sunny asked a couple of questions about the entertainment system built into the living room, scratched the back of his head after receiving the answers, and expressed his desire to see the second floor.

The second floor contained the master bedroom and two smaller ones, each with its own bathroom, and a brightly lit home office. There was also the latch to the storage space in the attic. Lanard described a few things about the furniture they chose, and then mentioned the soundproofing of the master bedroom several times, for some unknown reason.

Sunny frowned and gave him a strange look.

'I mean… sleeping in peace and quiet is nice, but he does know that I can't sleep in the real world, right? What a strange man…'

Finally, they descended into the basement, which was situated deep underground, as well as being the most heavily fortified and well-protected part of the house. In a sense, this was the heart of the unassuming grey home.

The whole basement was one large space, with walls, floor, and ceiling covered by heavy plates of armored ceramic alloy. This was done so that an Awakened could train here without worrying about destroying their own home or alerting the neighbors.

Sunny paid extra to make sure that every piece of training equipment here could survive his spars with Saint. He still remembered and mourned all the beautiful things he had lost during their previous duels. Like his favorite table... or his comfortable chair... or his pride...

The basement could be isolated from the rest of the house and from the outside world, turning into a heavily fortified, impenetrable alloy box. The reason for this level of additional security stood in a small alcove at the far end of it.

It was a state-of-the-art, beautiful, incredibly expensive sleeping pod — the best money could buy. Sunny walked over to it and stared at the softly illuminated, luxurious cradle for a while, then smiled.

'No more sore muscles…'

In its closed state, the pod looked like a steel monolith. As far as high-tech coffins went, this armored one was a real beauty. Sunny couldn't even call it a coffin, really. That thing… that thing was a whole sarcophagus.

With its help, he would be able to spend entire months in the Dream Realm without subjecting his physical body to any damage. He wasn't planning on getting lost in the Spell for so long, of course, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Lanard chuckled:

"I am not going to lie, every time I find myself in such an environment, I can't help but feel a little scared. Have you ever heard about Dracula, sir?"

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"Not really. What is that?"

The short man shivered.

"Just a legend, thankfully. Dracula was a fiend that fed on human blood and slept in a coffin underground. Hence the…"

Sunny smiled:

"Oh, a vampire? Yes, I've met one or two."

Lanard grew pale, remained silent for a while, then squeaked:

"M—m… met?"

Not paying him any attention, Sunny turned to the second pod that stood near the first one.

This device looked similar enough to a sleeping pod to be mistaken for one, but had nothing to do with sleeping. Well… not technically.

It also had a cradle and a heavy lid, but unlike Sunny's new sarcophagus, it wasn't designed to accommodate a human body for long periods of time. In fact, there was a plaque on the inside of the lid advising people against overusing the equipment and asking them to behave responsibly.

It was the best available Dreamscape pod, allowing one to enter the advanced virtual reality simulation that existed on the edge between technology and magic.

…Sunny had big plans for that thing.

Chapter-391: Dreamscape

Dreamscape was a place that was neither real nor a part of the Dream Realm, but instead existed somewhere in between. It was created and maintained by a combination of advanced modern technology and a very special Aspect Ability that a certain Master — now already a Saint — possessed. Their power had to do with illusions, and so, that was what Dreamscape was.

A massive illusion that countless people could share.

However, that illusion was not entirely malleable, and functioned according to a set of absolute rules. It reflected reality instead of being a complete replacement for it. As the result, a person entering it was bound by the same laws that existed in the real world.

And since one of those laws was the Nightmare Spell, a person's Aspect, Abilities, Memories, and Echoes would function in the illusion the same way they functioned outside of it, with one important difference. One couldn't be hurt, wounded, or killed in the Dreamscape. Neither Memories nor Echoes could be destroyed.

Which meant that Awakened were able to battle each other there without having to risk their lives and keep the destructive force of their duels out of the real world. This application was the primary use of the Dreamscape… well, in a sense.

At the dawn of it, the Dreamscape was mostly used by the Legacy Clans and the government to train elite Awakened that served them, but it was quickly deemed as only being marginally useful. While such training could facilitate safe duels between the human carriers of the Spell, its simulation of the Nightmare Creatures was not that close to reality.

The illusory monsters lacked the will and mind of actual abominations, after all.

So, the Dreamscape had failed to become a successful training tool and was thus largely abandoned.

It had, however, unexpectedly found incredible success in the entertainment segment.

Those Awakened that were not part of elite strike forces deemed it to be very engaging, useful… and fun. The duels in the Dreamscape became very popular, and that popularity simply exploded once the company behind it came up with the idea to integrate a broadcast function into the simulation pods, thus making these duels available to a much broader audience — the mundane humans.

Today, Dreamscape was a whole industry with both amateur and professional leagues, famous celebrities, and passionate fan clubs. There was even a version of it for non-Awakened, with its own set of environments and adventures that allowed people to experience a facsimile of what it meant to travel across the Dream Realm while battling Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny, however, wasn't interested in the fame, glory, and money that becoming a renowned Dreamscape champion could bring him. No matter how lucrative, it was just a toy, at the end of the day.

He was, nevertheless, extremely interested in that toy for three very important reasons.

The first reason was the anonymity that Dreamscape offered. It was all but impossible to track a person entering the illusion if they didn't wish to be tracked, which was very much to his liking.

The second reason was Shadow Dance. Sunny needed to fight against a multitude of opponents skilled in wielding different weapons and using various styles to sharpen his battle art and make it — as well as the Soul Serpent — stronger. In a sense, he needed to create a library of mirrored styles to enrich his own.

Was there a better place to find thousands upon thousands of Awakened who were willing and ready to cross blades with him? All without having to risk his life, to boot.

The third reason was rather unexpected. In fact, Sunny had stumbled upon it by pure accident.

Back when he had just arrived on the Chained Isles, he secretly tested the Mantle of the Underworld in battles against several Nightmare Creatures. The onyx armor had turned out to be even more remarkable than he had anticipated, so he easily hunted down several abominations.

And yet, one creature had managed to escape from him after being thoroughly defeated, mostly because of the approaching Crushing.

That was when he discovered how the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment really worked. Its description said that the onyx armor grew stronger according to the number of opponents its wielder defeated… and it did exactly that. The enchantment didn't care whether the opponent lived or died, all that mattered to it was that the enemy lost.

After the Nightmare Creature Sunny had beaten escaped, the counter of the enchantment still changed from [1215/6000] to [1216/6000].

He tested it in a battle with another abomination, bringing it to the door of death and then walking away without delivering the last blow. The counter went to [1217/6000].

So, Sunny hoped to kill two birds with one stone in the Dreamscape — to both elevate his technique and satiate the requirements of the [Prince of the Underworld] with a constant stream of victories.

Now that he had finally bought his own home and gained access to a sufficiently secure simulation pod, the chance to do so was finally in his grasp.

...But first, he needed to send Lanard away.

The two of them returned to the ground floor. The short man looked around and asked with a somewhat forced smile:

"I… I hope that everything was to your liking, sir?"

Trying not to show how weird it was for him to be addressed as "sir",

still, Sunny gave him a curt nod and answered evenly:

"Yes. It will do."

Lanard hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"Good. Great! Ahem… would you like to subscribe to our active security service? Many Awakened find it beneficial to have a dedicated security… team… guarding… uh…"

The short man started to give him an obviously practiced sales pitch, but under Sunny's indifferent gaze, his voice grew quieter and quieter, until eventually disappearing completely.

Sunny smiled slightly.

"I would not, Lanard. Do you really presume to be able to guard… me?"

Lanard gulped, then shook his head.

"Ha! Ha-ha. No, of course not. What was I thinking about, even? Please forgive me, sir."

He looked away, then hurried to change the subject:

"In any case, as you can see, the interior is rather empty. We left space for your to fit your… ahem… things. If you don't mind me asking, when are the movers arriving?"

Sunny stared at him, then shrugged.

"They're not. I don't own a lot of... things."

By which he meant that the clothes on his back and the stuff in his pockets were the total sum of his worldly possessions.

Lanard sighed, then nodded:

"How profound. Indeed, people these days are too preoccupied with material possessions. They define themselves through the ownership of things, not noticing that those things actually own them. I envy

your wisdom, sir."

'...What on earth is that guy going on about?'

Sunny stared at Lanard's tailored suit and antique watch with hidden envy. Those had to be expensive…

The short man caught the direction of his gaze, and blushed with embarrassment.

"Anyway! If no one is coming, then we can conclude the deal right here and now. I wouldn't want to… take too much of your precious time!"

They signed a few documents. All payments had been made in advance, so this was just a formality... but, despite that, completing this meaningless ritual made Sunny feel a deep and powerful emotion.

In a few minutes, Lanard was gone, leaving him alone in his new home.

The first home he had in many, many years.

Chapter-392: Birth of a Legend

For a while, Sunny stood motionlessly in the living room. Then, he slowly wandered around the house, looking at its walls and tastefully furnished rooms. Finally, he found himself near the refrigerator and took out a glass bottle full of clear, pure water.

With it in hand, Sunny walked outside and sat down on the porch.

The terrace district was quiet and peaceful. The air was still cold, but the sunlight was already full of warmth, promising a vibrant spring. The wind rustled the leaves gently, and streams of meltwater murmured softly as they ran down the pavement. Sunny stared at the piece of land that he now owned and opened the glass bottle.

He spent quite a while there, sipping water and looking at nothing in particular. As hours passed, several PTVs drove by. He saw a few people in clean and warm clothes. A bit later, droves of children and teenagers in school uniforms walked past, on their way home from their studies.

After that, he sighed, retrieved his shadows, and went back inside.

Bringing the empty bottle back to the refrigerator, he stared at it for a few moments.

Inside, there was food… so much food. Enough food to last him for a month. All easily accessible, delicious, and well within his means.

…Before Sunny knew it, his fist slammed into the door of the refrigerator, easily piercing the thin metal sheets and turning the vegetables stored on the other side into vapor. Pieces of metal and plastic flew in the air, and the whole house trembled slightly. The refrigerator itself cracked and deformed, nearly bursting apart from the force of the impact.

Sunny stared at his hand in shock, then awkwardly retrieved it from inside the devastated device and looked at the broken thing with dismay.

"...Crap!"

Now he was going to have to buy a new one. And replace all the food. And clean up all the mess…

'What the hell is wrong with me?'

Shaking his head, he put the empty glass bottle on the counter, sighed, and went to find a mop.

***

Some time later, Sunny returned to the basement and approached the Dreamscape pod. He looked at it for a while, then turned around and paced around the armored dojo, frowning.

'Come on now… you've been preparing for this for a long, long time.'

As he paced, his whole presence slowly changed. The way Sunny walked, the way he held himself, the way his hands moved all became slightly different.

"There are six gods. The War God, also known as the God of Life. The Beast God, also knowns as the Goddess of the Moon. The Sun God…"

As he recited the names of the gods and their various aspects, the manner in which he spoke also changed. The difference was subtle, but noticeable.

One after another, Sunny changed every little bit of behavioral traits that could be traced back to him. He had spent a lot of time training for this moment, using the physical malleability of a Shadow Dance practitioner to make himself unrecognizable. Surprisingly, the task had turned out much easier than he had thought. It was basically his specialty, anyway.

Weaver's Mask could protect his identity from all who would wish to learn it through magic, but he had to deal with mundane forms of

identification on his own.

After a while, when he was ready, Sunny undressed, approached the simulation pod, and climbed into its cradle. As the polished mask of black wood appeared on his face, the lid closed.

A string of shimmering letters appeared in front of him:

"Enter Dreamscape?"

"Yes" "No"

He sighed, then concentrated on the "Yes".

A few moments later, his vision darkened.

***

Sunny found himself standing in a boundless, black void. All around him, countless stars burned with ethereal light, an inconceivably complex weave of strings connecting them together.

…There was, however, no logic or sense in the pattern. He didn't feel any meaning hidden in the beautiful weave of the strings of light. It was just a pretty backdrop, and nothing more.

A fake.

Other than that, though, the simulation was pretty realistic. He looked down and saw his naked body, the Soul Serpent coiling around his arms and torso. The Dreamscape recreated his appearance to the sma… uh… in great detail.

'...Huh.'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny summoned the Mantle of the Underworld. It weaved itself from black threads and covered his body. As soon as it did, a pleasant voice resounded in the darkness:

"Challenger! Welcome to the Dreamscape."

Sunny summoned the Autumn Leaf — a small charm that allowed

him to change the color of his hair. After a short hesitation, he made it appear white.

'What next? How do I fight people?'

The pleasant voice promptly responded:

"Before proceeding further, please choose an alias."

He blinked a couple of times, then scratched the back of his head.

'Oh, right. An alias…'

After some thought, Sunny remembered the legend of Odysseus that Neph like to talk about, and smiled.

"Nobody."

That would be a good alias… he could already imagine how funny it would be, to hear something like "Nobody has defeated the enemy!" or "Nobody has won!".

His thoughts, however, were interrupted by the voice of the Dreamscape:

"Alias "Nobody" is taken. Please choose another."

"Uh…"

He did not expect that. What would be a better…

"Alias "Uh" is taken. Please choose another."

"What? No, wait!"

"Alias "What? No, wait!" is taken. Please choose another."

Sunny shut his mouth, then thought for a while.

His alias had to not only sound nice, but also be the opposite of what he would ever call himself in real life. Just like his movement and speech patterns, it had to be a part of the disguise. That's why coming up with one was not that easy…

In the next few minutes, he tried a dozen different aliases, all to the same result. The level of coolness of the aliases he could come up with rapidly dropped, while the level of his irritation quickly rose. He felt as if the damned simulation was mocking him.

Finally, Sunny growled in frustration and said the first word that came to his mind:

"...Mongrel!"

The Dreamscape was silent for a while. Then, it said:

"Welcome, Mongrel. Please, choose a dream of your liking."

'Really?! Mongrel?! Well… mission accomplished, I guess! This is indeed the last thing I would want to be known as!'

Oh, the irony…

As Sunny huffed and puffed from frustration, several images appeared in front of him. All contained depictions of different environments, although most looked like an arena of some sorts.

From his research, Sunny knew that the choice of an arena decided what type of opponents he would get to fight against. Some were available to everyone, some required a certain number of victories to be accessed. Professional duelists all spent their time in those elite dreams.

'Dreams… what a stupid name. If I was dreaming, I would be on the Chained Islands right now, wouldn't I?'

His body was, indeed, awake right now. It's just that his mind was inside of an illusion.

Regardless, what he needed was a place where he could fight sufficiently skilled amateurs without drawing too much attention. He knew just the place.

Pointing at one of the images, Sunny said.

"There."

A moment later, the black void disappeared, and he was suddenly somewhere else.

A loud voice thundered from somewhere above:

"Challenger Mongrel has entered the Colosseum!"

Chapter-393: Mongrel

Sunny was standing on the floor of a vast oval arena. It was covered by sand, which had long ago turned red from all the blood spilled between these ancient walls. The merciless sun burned in the incandescent sky, and the smell of sweat, blood, and death assaulted his nostrils.

'How... realistic.'

A little disturbed, Sunny looked around and saw tall amphitheater stands rising high above the blood-soaked arena. Those were the spectator seats. A crowd was cheering from them, their voices full of macabre fascination, cruelty, and glee. Both men and women were dressed in archaic robes that left their arms and shoulders bare.

With bloodthirsty smiles contorting their features, they looked like a horde of lustful demons.

Well… not all of them. Here and there, a strangely clothed person could be seen, observing the fights with a less barbaric expression. The people in archaic clothes were illusions, while the rest were actual observers.

One didn't have to be connected to the Dreamscape to spectate the duels, but some quirky fans preferred to be there in person to achieve the feeling of maximum immersion.

'Lunatics. Those damn simulation pods are too costly to use them for spectating…'

Even though Sunny wasn't poor anymore, seeing such extravagance still pained him. Shaking his head, he finally turned his attention to the arena itself.

Obviously, this illusory environment wasn't very original, but on the

other hand, it was a classic. More advanced dreams had vastly different decorations, ranging from realistic to completely fantastical, but for this low-level one, the company running Dreamscape chose a pretty basic narrative.

It was an ancient coliseum — a place where slaves had once fought to entertain their masters, often to the death.

Sunny didn't like it one bit.

The Colosseum was based on a historical structure, but was much larger. Hundreds upon hundreds of warriors roamed the sand of the battle arena, some engaged in fights, some searching for an opponent.

Out here in the Colosseum, most of the participants were Awakened of high enough skill to be considered the elite among the amateurs, but not skillful enough to enter the professional leagues. Just what Sunny was looking for... maybe. Overall, while many of the duelists in the Dreamscape were talented fighters, at the end of the day, there were very few true masters among them.

Real elites spilled blood in the Dream Realm, not in an illusion that had been conjured for the purpose of entertainment. So the level of competency of these people remained to be seen.

Commanding the Soul Serpent to assume the form of the fearsome odachi, Sunny put the blade of the great sword on his shoulder and waited to be challenged. Due to his menacing black armor and fearsome mask, however, people seemed to be reluctant to approach.

At least for a while.

Soon, a young swordsman in a striking bloodred armor approached, a long and graceful espadon resting on his shoulder. With a smile, he looked at Sunny and said:

"Haven't seen you around before… Mongrel? Are you new to the Coliseum?"

Sunny tilted his head and studied the letters that appeared around the swordsman.

"Paradise in Red"

"Victories: 157"

"Defeats: 103"

'Good enough.'

Lowering the odachi, he answered in an even tone:

"...I was born in the Coliseum."

The swordsman smiled, then stepped forward.

"Let me welcome you back, then."

The voice of the Dreamscape immediately spoke, announcing the start of the fight:

"Paradise in Red has challenged Mongrel!"

They clashed on the bloodied sand, moving with enough speed to cause the wind to howl through their armor.

Sunny had left one of his shadows on the ground, and wrapped another one around the Autumn Leaf, where it could do him no good — he didn't want to be too strong, so that his opponents were not completely outmatched and could properly showcase their styles.

As for himself, he had completely abandoned both the flowing style that Nephis had taught him and the grounded technique that he had learned from Saint, relying only on his ability to shadow the enemy's movements.

Paradise in Red was not a master of swordsmanship, but his skill level was not bad. Still, the young man wasn't a match for Sunny, even though he had to forego his practiced techniques and wasn't used to wielding the great blade of the odachi.

The material form of the Shadow Serpent was truly formidable, but due to its size and nature, using it required a lot of adjustment. It was potentially far more devastating than any shorter blade could ever

hope to be, but at the same time, demanded much more skill and strategy to be wielded efficiently. Any strike it delivered was potentially deadly, but so was every mistake made in the process.

Sunny prolonged the fight for as long as he could, learning as much as possible from how his opponent moved and wielded the sword. In the end, however, the strain of the duel turned out to be too much for the other fighter — he wasn't very strategic at how he spent his soul essence, so after five minutes or so, his speed and strength decreased sharply.

Sunny sighed and ended the duel with one precise slash of the Soul Serpent.

The great sword flashed across the enemy's neck, sending his head flying into the air.

The beheaded corpse fell to the ground in a rain of blood, then disappeared in a stream of sparks.

The voice of the Dreamscape thundered from above:

"Mongrel has won!"

'Too bad…'

Five minutes was not enough to truly learn the essence of a battle style. However, Sunny was certain that he would face another practitioner of this battle art eventually. There were not that many popular styles among the amateurs, after all. A few days or weeks later, he was bound to fight against someone with a similar technique again.

Attracted by his flashy victory, a few more challengers approached. Sunny flourished the Soul Serpent, then stopped it abruptly midair. Drops of blood flew to the sand, leaving the dark blade perfectly clean.

Under the mask, he grinned.

'Ah, so cool. Good thing that I learned this trick from Saint, too…'

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"Argh! Are you even human?!"

Another Awakened fell to the sand, blood flowing from his mouth.

Sunny took a step forward and slashed down with the Shadow Serpent, easily cutting through the opponent's light armor and splitting his body in half. The great sword he wielded... was truly devastating.

As the corpse disappeared, he cleaned the curved blade of the odachi with a swift flourish and answered with a dejected lie:

"Human? I am not, and have never been, a human."

By that time, a small crowd of Awakened had gathered around to spectate the fights and wait for their turn to challenge him. Hearing his words, one of them laughed:

"If you are not human, then what are you?"

Sunny glanced at him, then shrugged.

"A mongrel."

Internally, though, he was thinking:

'...What the heck?!'

In the past several hours, he had fought twenty-seven people. And out of them, twenty-five — twenty-five! — had been using the same battle style.

It was a practical, but rather simplistic art that relied on straightforward, efficient movements and attacks that were optimal in terms of lethality and energy expenditure, but for the same reason very predictable. In the hands of a master, the style could have been a real menace, but with these talented amateurs, it was useless against anyone with a tiny bit of clarity.

Several of the Aspects the challengers possessed had thrown him for a

loop, but in the end, he had defeated them all one after another, gaining a solid grasp of the essence of their style by the twentieth practitioner he fought.

These people were not exactly untalented, but Sunny felt the difference between them and himself sharply. He had to remind himself that, unlike him, they had not spent a whole year fighting for their lives in the hell of the Forgotten Shore.

Most of these young men and women had probably only experienced a handful of real battles in their entire lives: a few in the First Nightmare, and a few on their way to the Gateway. After that, they lived in well-protected Citadels and only ventured outside the walls in large cohorts... if ever.

'Disappointing…'

Although the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] had grown by twenty-seven victories, Sunny was slightly irritated. This was not what he had hoped for.

Variety, he needed variety. He needed to create a truly versatile library of styles to allow Shadow Dance to be more efficient in the future. The more basic styles he learned, the easier it would be for him to shadow a truly unique technique if he needed to.

...As he was thinking that today was a complete bust, a sudden wave of whispers ran both through the crowd of the Awakened fighters and the human spectators observing them from the stands.

A dozen or so meters behind Sunny, a tall figure suddenly appeared out of thin air.

When people saw the new arrival, their eyes widened.

Chapter-394: One Strike

Leo Striker appeared on the Colosseum and looked around with a bit of nostalgia. A few years ago, at the very start of his career, he had been a frequent visitor of this arena… this was where it all had started for him.

Times had changed, of course.

Using the few moments before he was recognized, Leo smiled widely and said:

"Well, well, well. Did you really think that I would forget about the Public Mondays, guys? Of course not! This is a sacred tradition… SACRED, guys. Some of the Strike Force veterans might remember how I started in the amateur arenas, and now that I am a brilliant, famous, and incredibly handsome celebrity, I have to return here from time to time. To, you know… stay humble."

There were currently around twenty thousand people watching his broadcast, and pretty much all of them immediately exploded with a flood of mocking messages. Glancing at the Broadcaster Interface that Dreamscape provided to popular duelists like him, he grinned and winked, humored by some of the good-natured jabs thrown his way.

Leo Striker was not the most extraordinary fighter in the Dreamscape, but over these past few years, he had gathered a rather large following thanks to his skill, flair, and boisterous personality. He was so popular, in fact, that thousands of younger Awakened became enamored with the battle style he and a few of his duelist buddies practiced.

As the result, the Roaring Lion Strike style had become all the rage among the amateur duelists, and his old mentor was now flooded by a deluge of new pupils. That fact really warmed Leo's heart… he was glad to be able to repay the old man for all his patience.

Leo spent most of his days participating in top-level duels on the professional league arenas, but on Mondays, he liked to visit a public dream or two, chat with fans, fight a few amateurs and provide them with pointers as a way to give back to the community.

Today was one such Monday.

Looking around the Colosseum, Leo noticed a small gathering a dozen or so meters away from him and headed over. As he walked, he heard excited voices:

"Hey… isn't that Leo Striker?!"

"No way… wait! It's him! I can recognize that gorgeous armor with my eyes closed!"

"Leo! Love you, man! Keeping it real like always!"

"Strike Force Roar! I've been watching your broadcasts for two years, Leo!"

A friendly smile appeared on his face. Waving at several fans, he approached the crowd of challengers and glanced at the lone figure standing in the empty space in the middle.

'Woah! This dude has style!'

The man in the middle of the crowd wore a beautiful onyx armor that radiated a sense of solemn, dark menace. His face was hidden behind a fearsome black mask, with three twisting horns rising from it like a jagged crown. His hair was stark white, and there were two pools of impenetrable darkness in the place where his eyes were supposed to be.

His weapon of choice was a long, curved odachi forged of lusterless black steel. It rested on his shoulder, seemingly devouring the bright light of the illusory sun.

The stranger looked more like a demon than a human being.

Leo let out an approving whistle.

'Is he also a broadcaster? Huh, I don't recognize those Memories.'

He checked the stats of the demonic warrior.

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 27."

"Defeats: 0."

'A newbie… but a talented one! A perfect KDA, what a rarity!'

In any case, that guy was incredibly photogenic. A duel with him was not going to be interesting due to the gap in their skill, but it would definitely look stunning. Leo felt a little ashamed to break Mongrel's perfect streak, but this talented amateur would receive useful advice in return, which was far more beneficial.

Who knows, they might meet again in the professional arena one day…

Looking at the invisible camera, Leo raised an eyebrow and asked:

"What do you say, Strike Force? Should we challenge that dark and handsome guy over there?"

As the viewers expressed their approval, he approached Mongrel and gave him a friendly smile.

"Hey there, friend. That's a big sword you got there. Do you even know how to use it?"

Teasing the opponent was another sacred tradition of the Dreamscape, and Leo was rather good at it.

Mongrel shifted slightly and faced him. The disturbing mask stared at Leo, making him shiver slightly for no apparent reason.

"No."

Leo laughed.

"No? You don't know how to use your sword? Well, would you like

me to teach you?"

The demonic warrior stared at him and didn't even move.

"No."

'What's up with that dude? Does he not know other words? Come on, work with me here, buddy! I am dying here, trying to make this duel entertaining…'

With a sigh, Leo stepped forward and unsheathed his own blade.

The viewers once again exploded with a flood of messages, and at the same time, the voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"...Leo Striker has challenged Mongrel!"

***

'Goddammit!'

Sunny stared at the young man in a beautiful azure armor, cursing his luck.

'Why can't he get a hint?!'

Even though Sunny couldn't say a word of truth while wearing Weaver's Mask, he tried to communicate his reluctance to fight this guy... to no result whatsoever.

He didn't have anything against the new challenger… what did the Dreamscape call him, Leo?... but there was one problem.

Just from the way the young man walked, Sunny could tell that he practiced the same damned battle style that everyone else here seemed to practice. And Sunny had more than enough of it for one day.

'Ugh…'

His time in the real world was limited, so he really hoped to experience a more diverse collection of opponents before it ran out.

'Maybe there's still hope. Maybe the next one is going to be different.'

It was better to finish this fight quickly, then.

Sending the happy shadow from the Autumn Leaf to his body, Sunny lowered the Shadow Serpent and took a step forward.

His opponent, meanwhile, smiled.

"Let me teach you the first lesson. You should always…"

'...wear a helmet into the battle, fool.'

Dashing forward, Sunny easily deflected Leo's blow and pierced his head clean through by continuing the same motion.

As the corpse of the eloquent young man fell down and disintegrated into a rain of sparks, he flourished the odachi to clean it from blood, returned to his previous spot, and indifferently put it on his shoulder.

'I swear to gods. The next person to challenge me better be using a different style. Otherwise… I might get angry!'

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Leo Striker found himself standing in a boundless black void, his mouth agape.

His viewers, too, were uncharacteristically silent.

'One strike… one strike! He killed me in one strike?'

He lingered for a few moments, then turned to the invisible camera and forced out an awkward smile.

"That was… uh… that was really unexpected, right guys?"

Then, his smile grew wide and sincere.

"That, Strike Force, is what people call finding a diamond in a pile of… uh… dung! Incredible luck! Yeah, definitely a stroke of luck. Oh, by the way... has anyone clipped it?"

Chapter-395: Roaring Lion, Hidden Dragon

Leo sent the clip to a couple of his buddies and waited in the dark void, chatting with the viewers and laughing about his terrible performance in the duel against the demonic newbie.

'That Mongrel... there's something about him...'

Just as he had expected, his friends joined him in the Dreamscape almost immediately after receiving the message.

Yes, his defeat was rather embarrassing… but there was an opportunity in every disaster!

This was going to be a very special broadcast.

A rare and bombastic… crossover episode!

Answering the invitations, two figures joined him in the black void. The viewers grew silent for a moment, and then sent so many reactions that the Broadcast Interface almost crashed.

Well, as expected. Both guests Leo had invited were very prominent duelists, at least as popular as he was himself, or perhaps even more.

One wore a heavy plate armor. There was a castle engraved on its breastplate, and four dragons depicted on his pauldrons and vambraces. This was Daoist Saifer, a renowned swordsman who possessed a powerful Aspect that allowed him to control fire.

The other was a taciturn warrior in a grey silken robe. His alias in the Dreamscape was the Fool, and he was known to be one of the most peculiar and persistent duelists in the professional league.

Leo grinned.

"Hey there, Saifer. Hey there, Fool. Long time no see!"

Saifer scoffed, then pointed at him.

"Leo, my friend. What the hell was that? You got killed by an amateur… in one strike!"

The Fool simply shook his head and remained silent.

Leo coughed in embarrassment and looked down.

"Yeah, well… it's not like the two of you never tasted a piece of humble pie, is it? If I remember correctly, Queen Bee decimated both of you just last week…"

Saifer grinned.

"I am ready to be killed by our noble Queen every day. But a newbie? Come on..."

Leo shrugged, then pointed to his sword.

"Alright, alright. But there's a reason the two of you arrived so quickly, right? You saw it too?"

The two duelists glanced at each other, then slowly nodded.

Leo turned to the camera and smiled brilliantly.

"What? None of you battle geniuses have noticed it? Well, well, well. It's this rare moment when I get to mock my dear viewers and their insufferable expert advice!"

He gestured to his friends, then continued:

"For those Strike Force veterans who still remember the early days of my broadcasting… as you might know, these two distinguished gentlemen are actually not only my colleagues, but also disciples of the same cranky old man who taught me swordsmanship. Basically, the three of us are childhood friends, and we practice the same

ingenious battle style. The Roaring Lion Strike style."

He paused, and then sighed mysteriously:

"And while it hurts my pride a little to have been defeated by an unknown novice, the real reason why I was so shocked by our duel… IS… YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT... oh yeah, before we do this, I should mention the sponsor of today's…"

Saifer rolled his eyes and interrupted him:

"Cut it, Leo! What he was going to say is that the masked guy used the Roaring Lion Strike style to defeat that dolt. And while there are many — lots and lots, really — people who can beat that loud nuisance in a heartbeat, the fact that someone done so while using our own style is very interesting."

Leo glanced at his friend with vitriol, but then gave up on the ad break and nodded.

"Indeed. So, the three of us are going to go and see who that Mongrel really is, and what is he really capable of…"

***

Sunny felt that something weird was going on in the Colosseum after he dispatched the young man in azure armor. The other Awakened seemed to stare at him with a bit of confusion… shock, even.

The same went for the human spectators in the amphitheater. Many had changed seats to get closer to him.

'What's the matter with all these people? Did I go overboard and move too fast?'

But no, he had measured his dash to not appear too powerful. Maybe they just liked the spectacle? Sunny was, indeed, giving them a good show. Not that doing so was his intention...

'Anyway… why is no one challenging me? Stop wasting my time, people! I'm on a tight schedule!'

Indeed, no one in the small crowd of Awakened that had been waiting for their turn to fight him seemed willing to step forward now. Sunny stared at them in boredom for a few minutes, trying to understand what was going on. They had been very eager just a few moments ago, no?

Then, someone finally walked toward him, unsheathing a formidable-looking sword.

The guy was wearing plate armor, with an intricate engraving of a castle and four dragons decorating its polished surface. He looked strong, noble, and experienced.

'You. Must. Be. Kidding me!'

The same style… he was obviously practicing the same damn style!

As Sunny's eyes narrowed, the voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"Daoist Saifer has challenged Mongrel!"

Before the guy in plate armor could even attack, Sunny unceremoniously bashed him in the face with the pommel of the odachi, swiped his foot, and then viciously thrust the tip of the great sword into the narrow crack of his visor.

As blood flowed from the steel helmet, the voice of the Dreamscape thundered once again:

"Mongrel has won!"

The faces in the crowd grew a bit pale.

'What the hell is wrong with these people?! Is there no one here who knows a different style?!'

Before Sunny could even clean the blade of the Shadow Serpent, a new challenger approached.

This one was wearing a grey silken robe.

"The Fool has challenged Mongrel!"

The bastard was wielding a heavy saber… and using the same cursed battle art!

Sunny let out a low growl and dashed forward.

The Fool turned out to be more nimble and aware than the last two fighters. He managed to sidestep the attack… sadly, it had turned out to be just a feint. Before he could correct his footing, the odachi pierced his chest and exited from his back.

Sunny tore the great sword out of the enemy's body and stepped back in frustration.

The man in the grey silken robe swayed and stared at the growing red patch on his silk garment. Looking up at Sunny, he silently gave him a thumbs up, then collapsed to the sand in a rain of sparks.

"Mongrel has won!"

'Curse it all! Do I need to go to a professional arena to find a proper opponent?!'

These people were not, exactly, bad fighters… the three last ones especially… but why on earth were all of them so similar to each other?

Sunny looked around and noticed that the Colosseum was deathly silent. Everyone was staring at him with strange expressions.

'Wait… don't tell me…'

He scowled behind the mask, a terrible suspicion entering his mind.

'Is… is this whole arena meant for practitioners of a single style? Was I breaking some unspoken taboo this whole time? That would be a bastard move… no, wait, that doesn't make any sense. I was using the same style as them…'

Suddenly, a familiar face approached him from the crowd. It was the young man in the azure armor. Lion Beater, or whatever…

'No… oh gods, please no! I don't want to fight him again…'

The young man stopped a few meters away from Sunny, hesitated for a few moments, then smiled and asked in a light tone:

"Mongrel, my friend... if you don't mind me asking… what are you even doing here, in this amateur arena?"

Sunny rolled his eyes behind the mask. The answer was really simple: he was here to learn.

But he couldn't say that, of course. He was also too frustrated to come up with a creative lie.

Staring at the young man, he allowed the Soul Serpent to disappear and become a tattoo again, then said somberly:

"I am here to unlearn."

Lion Beater blinked a couple of times, then shifted his weight slightly, clearly intending to unsheath his sword.

'Enough of this!'

With an irritated huff, Sunny commanded the Dreamscape to eject him from the arena and disappeared from the Colosseum in a shower of white sparks.

Climbing out of the simulation pod, he stared at it with resentment, then suddenly flinched and grabbed his hand with another.

"No, no… we don't want the refrigerator accident to happen again, not to this beautiful, shiny, extremely expensive pod… right? Right! I should… I should probably go and get some fresh air… try it again next time, on a more challenging arena…"

With that, he threw the last glance at the high-tech device, and walked away.

…What Sunny did not see, though, was the crowd of Awakened back in the Colosseum, all staring at the empty space where he had stood a minute ago.

Leo Striker stared at it, too, a thoughtful expression on his face.

A few seconds later, he said quietly:

"To… unlearn? Huh."

Chapter-396: Viral Sensation

Sunny salvaged some food from the destroyed fridge, had a very late supper, and went down to the basement again, this time to travel to the Chained Isles.

By then, all shadow essence he had spent during the duels and to keep the Mantle of the Underworld from turning back to stone had already been restored.

Wearing the onyx armor required a constant flow of essence to maintain the [Feather of Truth] enchantment active — if Sunny wanted to keep its weight sufficiently light, at least — and with the Soul Serpent assuming its weapon form, Sunny couldn't use the Shadow to keep the expenditure to a minimum. Wearing the Mantle for prolonged periods of time was rather draining...

however, it was also a perfect way to train himself on how to manage essence most efficiently. He had no complaints.

...It was funny, though, that the Dreamscape required a person to expend real essence despite being just an illusion.

'Oh well.'

Climbing into his new, state-of-the-art sleeping pod, Sunny lay comfortably in the soft cradle and smiled.

'No more sore muscles! Finally.'

With that, he closed his eyes, and very quickly fell asleep.

While his soul wandered the Dream Realm and his body slept, locked in an underground bunker behind multiple layers of protection, though... several things happened in the real world.

The clip of his short duel against Leo Striker had unexpectedly gone viral.

All around the planet, countless people watched it with a wide range of reactions. Some found it funny, some fascinating, while some simply scrolled past it as they watched their feeds.

Even those who did not have any interest in the Awakened duels found it striking, though. The image of an infernal wraith clad in black onyx armor defeating a charming, noble human warrior with one swift and ruthless strike was, indeed, very cinematic… just how Leo had predicted. Even if, to his dismay, the roles had ended up being switched.

What's more, even though Sunny had not even known that their fight was being broadcasted, he accidentally looked directly at the invisible camera right after cruelly putting the tip of his odachi through the opponent's eye.

The image of the fearsome black mask staring emotionlessly directly at them, two pools of darkness hiding the eyes of the human being behind it, sent shivers down the spines of people watching the clip.

It was chilling, arresting, and strangely hypnotic.

Many of them had the same question after watching the clip on repeat several times…

Was there even a human there, behind the scary mask?

People who followed the Dreamscape leagues, however, had an entirely different reaction. Although they, too, appreciated the undeniable aesthetic value of the short and striking duel, they paid more attention to the actual meaning of it.

How could a completely unknown novice defeat an established and well-regarded duelist, someone as famous as Leo Striker… in just one strike? The exact moment when Sunny delivered the deadly blow was analyzed, disassembled, and put under the microscope. Was it skill or pure luck? Was it intentional or accidental? Did Leo make a mistake, or was his mysterious adversary just that much better?

The answer was rather confusing: no one had the slightest idea.

Obviously, once people became curious, they didn't stop on just that one viral clip.

Rather swiftly, every fight and every word that Sunny had uttered during his infuriating visit to the Dreamscape were found and published for everyone to see.

...Once people saw the contents of those recordings, the whole duelist circle was violently shaken. One shock was followed by another, and then by yet another, still.

The first thing that people found during their investigation was two more short clips.

One showed Mongrel killing Daoist Saifer in the span of a single second.

The other showed Mongrel killing the Fool… once again, with a single ruthless strike.

All in all, it took him less than a minute to easily crush three of the most renowned young duelists in the world. They weren't the absolute elite, but still some of the best the Dreamscape had to offer.

The conclusion was obvious: his victory over Leo Striker was neither lucky nor accidental. Mongrel was, indeed… just that much better.

But how could that be?!

Was he some other famous duelist in disguise?

People continued to dig, coming to a bewildering conclusion: the man who called himself Mongrel had never entered Dreamscape before that day. His profile showed only two pieces of information:

"Victories: 30."

"Defeats: 0."

And:

"Status: Offline."

After that, many theories appeared postulating that Mongrel was, in fact, a Master who had visited the Dreamscape to have fun. There weren't that many Masters in the world, and all of them had much more crucial things to do than spend their time having illusory duels.

Even if they did, however, those duels transpired in private arenas that were created specifically for the occasion, away from the public eye.

Still, if Mongrel was a Master, that would explain it all. He was just much stronger...

But he wasn't.

That theory was debunked when the recordings of his other twenty-seven duels were unearthed. After watching them, the investigating enthusiasts became truly shaken — and for a very strange reason.

It was because those recordings showed Mongrel actually struggling against much weaker opponents.

Now wait a minute… what the hell did that mean?!

How could a man struggle against novices, fighting them for an average of five to ten minutes, and then kill three experienced professionals in three seconds?

The answer was simply mind-boggling. While people who did not know much about combat techniques assumed that Mongrel had been just pretending to be weak, more knowledgeable experts came to a stunning conclusion…

Mongrel only used the styles of his opponents to fight against them.

He came into the Colosseum not knowing anything about the popular Roaring Lion Strike style, and mastered it in the span of a single evening to such degree that even the Fool, Daoist Saifer, and Leo Striker himself — the three fighters who had popularized the style in the first place — couldn't resist him even for a couple of seconds.

Now, it was the experts' turn to shiver.

Ironically, after understanding what exactly had transpired, they were left with the same question that the people who knew knowing about Awakened duels had after watching the viral clip.

…Was the being wearing the black wooden mask even human?

And all of them, regardless of their interests and level of knowledge about battle arts, were now wondering the same:

"...Who the hell is Mongrel?"

Chapter-397: Mongrel's Wisdom

In the absence of any new information, people had no choice but to look back at the existing recordings of Mongrel. Fascinated by the mysterious demonic warrior, they disassembled his every action and every word, trying to find some hint to his identity, background, and standing.

Although there was not much to learn, they gradually came to perceive his sayings as rather meaningful.

...In fact, people ended up finding too much meaning in them, even though there was none. It was all just awkward lies Sunny had come up with on the spot to fulfill the requirements of the [Simple Trick]. He had never, ever intended to say something profound.

But when had good intentions ever stopped people from over-complicating things?

Without Sunny knowing anything about it, Mongrel had gained a… philosophy.

"Are you new to the Coliseum?"

"...I was born in the Coliseum."

Sitting in a school cafeteria, two students stared at a cheap communicator, their eyes burning with enthusiasm.

One of the boys frowned, then asked in confusion:

"I don't get it… what does he mean? Isn't the Colosseum just a Dreamscape arena? How could a person be born there?"

His friend shook his head with disdain:

"Idiot! Don't you get it? Mongrel doesn't mean that he was born in the

Dreamscape! He means that he was born in battle. Those ancient gladiators were slaves forced to fight to the death against their will. Aren't Awakened the same?

They are infected by the Spell and have no choice but to battle Nightmare Creatures to survive. In a sense, all Awakened were born in the Colosseum…"

Somewhere in the outskirts, several workers had gathered together during their short break.

"Are you even human?"

"What is a human? I am not, and have never been, a human."

One of the workers shivered.

"Scary… do you think that Mongrel is actually a Nightmare Creature that infiltrated the real world?"

Another shook his head.

"No, of course not."

The first sighed:

"Then why would he say that he's not human?"

The second worker looked at the dirty tunnel of the industrial air filter exhaust they were cleaning, then at his own calloused hands.

"What the hell does it even mean, to be a human? Do you think that you and I are really humans? No, you fool. That Mongrel has more brains than you, I swear. He at least understands that just having two legs and two hands does not make you a human. He gets how it is…"

The third listened to their conversation and grimaced.

"So what? Yeah, he gets it, but I don't see him complaining. That guy took the hand he was dealt and turned himself into a... a damned sword demon. What have you done? That's the lesson he is trying to teach us, I think.

No one will treat you as a human unless you behave like one…"

Far away, in the Sleeper compound of the Academy, a group of young men and women were looking at a screen.

"That's a big sword you got there. Do you even know how to use it?"

"No."

"No? You don't know how to use your sword? Well, would you like me to teach you?"

"No."

One of the Sleepers scratched the back of his head, then asked:

"I don't get it. Why did Mongrel lie about not knowing how to use a sword? He is obviously a very experienced fighter. Maybe even a Legacy! Was he trying to trick Leo into underestimating him?"

A girl standing near him chuckled.

"He didn't lie. Why would Mongrel need to trick Leo? He would win against him fair and square, regardless. No, there's a deeper meaning in his words."

The other Sleeper raised an eyebrow:

"What meaning?"

The girl smiled knowingly.

"Only a boastful duelist like Leo Striker would claim to know his way around a sword. A true master, one who battles Nightmare Creatures in the Dream Realm instead of playing games with pampered Awakened in the Dreamscape, would know that they have infinitely more yet to learn than they already know. That's what Mongrel meant.

No matter how good he is, he understands that in the grand scheme of things, his skill and power are like that of an infant."

Her friend was quiet for a while, then asked:

"If that's the case, then why did he say that he doesn't want to learn more?"

The girl shook her head.

"He didn't say that he doesn't want to learn. He said that he doesn't want Leo to teach him. The true enemy of an Awakened is the Spell, not other humans. That's why Mongrel doesn't want to be taught by battling humans... even if he has to. And also, if someone is strong like Mongrel, they can end a fight with one strike.

But true strength… true strength is not needing to strike at all. Maybe that's what Mongrel wants. To become powerful enough so that he never has to bare his sword again…"

And just a few hundred meters away from them, on her way to the Academy hospital complex, a young woman in a wheelchair was staring at her communicator with an amused expression on her face.

"What are you doing here, in this amateur arena?"

"I am here to unlearn."

This quote, especially, had become a topic of heated discussion across the network. Among the duelist, it caused a whole philosophical storm. Countless Awakened were passionately debating its meaning. No one knew what exactly Mongrel meant, but everyone had at least a theory.

The only thing everyone agreed on was that his short statement hid profound, fundamental wisdom about the nature of combat and ways to become a master of it.

…Not Effie, though.

Looking at her communicator, she shook her head and said:

"To unlearn? Huh, that guy must have hit his head one too many times. What a dimwit."

Then, she looked at the image once again, and added:

"And also, what's up with that armor? It looks so familiar. For a moment, I thought that Sunny's Echo had run wild. Ha, what a fun idea… the look on his face would have been priceless!"

With that, she shook her head, deactivated the communicator, and continued on her way.

Effie had more important things to do than waste her time thinking about mongrels...

The rest of the world, though, apparently did not.

Chapter-398: Master of his Trade

Blissfully oblivious to the storm his visit to the Dreamscape was causing back in the real world, Sunny opened his eyes on the Altar Island of the Sanctuary.

Because of how much time he had spent fruitlessly searching for worthy opponents on the Colosseum, he arrived on the Chained Isles much later than he usually would. The sunset was still a few hours away, and the sky was clear and bright. He was welcomed by the familiar murmur of flowing water, the rustling of leaves, and a cool breeze.

Sunny flinched slightly and threw a resentful glance at the deep pool of clean water surrounding the small piece of land on which the altar and the ancient tree stood.

During his first visit to the Sanctuary, Saint Tyris herself had brought him here from the real world. Both of them had appeared near the altar… there had been a small problem, though. Sunny had materialized a bit further than people usually did, and as the result, plunged straight into the pool instead of landing on solid ground.

Not a big setback. However, in a moment of disorientation, he almost had a heart attack. Falling into water reminded him of his first minutes on the Forgotten Shore just too much. For a second, he had thought that he was back in that godforsaken place…

Ever since that day, Sunny never ended up in the water instead of on the soil of the Altar Island again, but the scare that first time had given him was still fresh in his memory.

'Not today!'

With a triumphant smirk, he left the white altar behind and headed toward the ring of tall menhirs.

Now that it was day, the Sanctuary looked more populated. Groups of Awakened rested on the grass of the park, some discussing upcoming ventures into the wilderness, some simply killing time until they were able to return to the real world.

One couldn't just enter the Gateway immediately after appearing in the Dream Realm. Perhaps because the soul wasn't able to withstand traveling between worlds too often, perhaps because the Spell did not wish for them to return too quickly, or perhaps for some another, unknown reason, Awakened had to wait several hours before being allowed to use a Gateway again.

The exact time they had to wait was slightly different from person to person, but in general, it was somewhere around ten hours. During these hours, those Awakened who did not wish to risk their lives in the wild expanses of the Dream Realm usually went about their business or fulfilled their duties to the Citadel.

A lot of work went into keeping human enclaves in the Dream Realm going. Apart from the obvious demand to keep watch on the walls and fight off attacking Nightmare Creatures, mundane tasks like cleaning and preparing food were also shared among the inhabitants of the Citadels.

In a sense, each Citadel was a settlement — some were small, some large enough to house thousands upon thousands of the Awakened. The population of the three Great Citadels was even higher, with hundreds of thousands of humans visiting them every day.

The Sanctuary was a rather tiny Citadel, in comparison, so each of the Awakened anchored here had to do their share of work to preserve it.

Luckily, Sunny had been assigned a role of an advanced scout — in exchange for his reports about the things he noticed during his expeditions and the movements of Nightmare Creatures across the Isles, he was all but freed from other tasks, only occasionally having to do a small chore or stand watch during the darkest hours of the

night.

He was rather happy with that situation.

Sunny greeted a few people he was on somewhat friendly terms with, entered the interior of the Sanctuary, then headed to his room. Now was a good time to finish the things he had not done during his last visit.

Namely, exchange the soul shard he had collected for Memories or credits… oh, and to properly study the ancient coin to draw and describe it for Teacher Julius later.

But the useless coin could wait. Right now, Sunny really wanted to satiate his avarice.

Unlocking the chest that stood at the foot of his bed, he fished out the soul shards off its bottom and unceremoniously threw them into the pack. The strange fruits he had gathered during his last journey also went there, leaving the chest more or less empty.

Noticing the golden coin glinting between a few curios that Sunny had collected in the past two months, he hesitated for a moment, then shrugged, picked it up, and hid it under one of the Puppeteer Shroud's vambraces.

'All set…'

It was time to haggle.

Returning to the park contained within the inner circle of the Sanctuary, Sunny glanced at the Awakened gathered there, walked over to a big, sun-washed rock, and sat down on it. Taking out the soul shards, he placed them on its surface and waited patiently, pretending to be bored and indifferent.

It almost looked as if he was simply enjoying the sun, while the soul shards had somehow appeared near him by accident.

In the beginning, Sunny had to walk around and initiate trades, but by now, the inhabitants of the Sanctuary had already caught wind of the fact that he often had soul shards to trade. Sunny just had to keep

his trading operation seemingly humble, at least on the surface.

If people knew how many Nightmare Creatures he really killed, things would become a bit difficult. He was known to be from the Forgotten Shore, which gave him a bit of leeway of how deadly of a hunter he could appear to be, but it was still wise to keep the full extent of his competency to himself.

Of all the people on the Chained Island, only Saint Tyris and her trusted aids knew about his SS evaluation. So whatever soul shards Sunny didn't sell to the local Awakened, he sold directly to the White Feather clan, leaving all parties satisfied by the arrangement.

Soon, the first customer approached, looking at the gleaming crystals with burning eyes.

Sunny smiled brightly.

"Oh, hey there. Looking to trade for a shard or two? Well, you're in luck, my friend... Sunny's Brilliant Emporium is currently open for business!"

Chapter-399: Golden Coin

If there was one thing Sunny missed about the Forgotten Shore, it was how scarce the resources out there were. As the result, the value of soul shards was way higher there than back in the real world. Well… the parts of the Dream Realm that were better connected to the real world, at least.

Not that shards were cheap here. It's just that the deals Sunny was able to make were not as lucrative as the ones he had made in the Dark City. He was also not able to bring the soul shards back to the real world with him, which also affected the final price.

In the end, the collection of crystals he had gathered during his last trip through the Chained Island — including those retrieved from Fallen creatures — only landed him three Memories of questionable utility. He fed them to Saint, bringing her shadow fragment counter to [163/200].

'Not bad, I guess.'

After concluding his business in the park, Sunny went to the kitchens and traded the fruits he had found for a bunch of credits.

The fruits were a very rare commodity on the Chained Isles — they could not be made into anything even remotely useful or advantageous, but some bright mind in the Sanctuary had once come up with a method to make them into a very hard-hitting and tasty wine. Sunny himself had sworn off alcohol after his experiences on the Forgotten Shore, but he wasn't against making some money from it.

In the early days of the Sanctuary, the wine was all the rage among the local Awakened. Not too long after it had been established, most of the man-eating vines that grew the fruits had been hunted down to extinction on the island surrounding the Citadel. Now, only people

who went further and risked their lives more had a chance to find several fruits, so the cost was rather substantial.

'That should… uh… buy me a new fridge, I think.'

Sunny had only a very vague idea of how much refrigerators cost, but suspected that this recent exchange would be enough to cover the expenses of shopping for a new one.

All in all, he was satisfied with the result of his recent expedition. He was progressing at a steady pace and slowly gathering everything he needed to make it even faster.

...Just in time, considering that Nephis was days away from becoming a devil.

With a slight frown, he exited the ring of menhirs and looked up.

The trades took him several hours to complete, so it was already night. The crescent moon was visible in the dark sky, and the winds grew cold and forceful. Up above, heavy clouds were gathering.

'I think it's going to rain.'

Suddenly in a sullen mood, Sunny sighed and thought about his plans.

Usually, he would be charting out a route for his next venture into the Isles, either going for a yet unexplored ruin or a habitat of the Nightmare Creatures he was preparing to challenge and kill. But these excursions took several days to complete, and he had a lot of business to take care of in the real world right now.

'Can I return already?'

He had only spent around four hours in the Dream Realm, but sometimes, that was enough — for him, at least. Sunny had no idea why his experience with the Gateways was different from most other people, but suspected that it was either because of his two cores or because of the fact that he had spent an entire year in this dead world even before becoming an Awakened.

Maybe the [Spark of Divinity] had something to do with it, too.

In any case, he tended to avoid returning to the real world too fast too often, in order to not attract unnecessary attention. Today, however, he was willing to forego extra caution… the things waiting for him back there were very important, or at least pressing.

With a shrug, Sunny headed toward the Altar Island. Walking on the stone path in complete darkness, he looked up at the veil of clouds hiding the moon and sighed.

'Not like I would really want to venture out in the rain, anyway.'

Approaching the white monolith of the altar, Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then put his hand on it.

Nothing happened.

'...Oh. I guess it's too early, after all.'

What a disappointment.

With nothing to do but kill time and wait for the opportunity to activate the Gateway, Sunny paced a little, stared at the depths of the clear pool, then paced some more.

Finally, he returned to the altar and grabbed the handle of the obsidian knife laying on its surface… purely out of boredom.

Sunny strained every muscle in his body and tried to lift the damned thing, but no matter how hard he pulled, the knife didn't move even by a millimeter.

'Move, damn you!'

However, there was no response.

Giving up, Sunny grimaced and let go of the knife.

'Well, that's a bust… again...'

As he did so, though, a heavy gold coin slid out from under his

vambrace and fell on the polished surface of the altar with a melodic ring. It rolled a few times and then landed flat, the face of the beautiful person with the image of the crescent drawn on their forehead looking at him with a carefree smile.

'Oh, right… I had forgotten about that thing…'

Sunny moved his hand to pick up the coin, but at that moment, the veil of clouds split slightly, letting through a beam of pure, pale moonlight.

The light fell on the coin and made it gleam.

…A moment later, the surface of the coin suddenly shone with ethereal radiance. The features of the person etched on it became sharper, then disappeared into the light.

When the light dissipated, the coin was gone.

Sunny stared at the empty spot where it had been just a few seconds ago with a bewildered expression.

It was then when the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[Your Shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-400: Call of Treasure

[Your Shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny stared at the place where the coin used to be, then blinked.

'What just happened?'

He dropped the coin on the altar, it was illuminated by the moonlight, and disappeared. And then, he received a shadow fragment.

'No way…'

Holding back excitement, Sunny summoned the runes and read:

Shadow Fragments: [198/2000].

The last time he checked, there was only one hundred and ninety-seven. He had definitely, without a doubt, just received a shadow fragment from the strange golden coin.

'So it wasn't an ordinary coin, after all!'

A satisfied smile appeared on his lips.

Not only was the coin special, it was even not cursed. On the contrary, it was blessed!

'Well, that was the easiest shadow fragment I have ever received…'

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

'Wait…'

Weren't there more coins he had left behind on the Iron Hand Island? Three more, at least, had been swallowed by the dead monstrosity.

Before the thought fully formed in his mind, Sunny was already leaving the Altar Island.

'Two things… there are two things…'

The first one was that other coins could, potentially, turn out the same as the first one and reward him with free fragments. The second one was that where there were three, there could be more… much more.

The Fallen Demon he had discovered could have come from a place where a whole treasure trove of miraculous coins was hidden. A whole mountain of them, even. If Sunny was right and managed to somehow trace the path the creature took before dying…

Who knew how much more powerful he would become?

Trying to suppress the giddy feeling of discovering a huge and tantalizing secret, Sunny left the Sanctuary and headed toward the edge of the island. As the sound of waterfalls grew louder and the first drops of rain fell to the ground, a dark silhouette suddenly took a step towards him.

It was one of the watchmen.

"Huh… Sunny, right? Are you really going to go out in that weather?"

Most of the watchmen here in the Sanctuary already knew that he was comfortable in the dark, so their initial surprise about seeing someone leave the Citadel at night had more or less disappeared by now. It was still strange for some of them, though.

Sunny halted for a few moments, then smiled.

"Yeah. Don't worry, I will be fine. I'm not going far, anyway. Just want to check something on the Iron Hand Island."

The watchman hesitated, then shrugged.

"Alright. Be careful out there. Night vision or not, this is not the time for humans."

Sunny thanked the man for his concern, then walked past him.

'Not the time for humans? Good thing I am a monster, then…'

Approaching the edge of the Sanctuary Island, he didn't waste any time and summoned the Dark Wing. Sunny was tempted to simply turn into a shadow and rush toward his goal, but he didn't want to show his powers near the Citadel so openly.

'Patient. Be patient…'

Since the Dark Wing couldn't really allow him to fly, he glided above the chain for as long as he could, then landed on it and continued forward on foot. By that time, the rain was already falling rather heavily. The iron surface beneath his feet was treacherous and slippery, so Sunny had to be careful and watch his step, lest he plummeted down, into the Sky Below.

He shivered, trying to think of a more terrible fate. With no means of real flight, he would just be falling through the darkness, endlessly, until his mind was gone and his body consumed itself from hunger, then slowly turned into dust.

People on the Chained Isles loved to tell horrible stories about unfortunate souls who fell into the Below, and Sunny could easily understand their fear. For that reason, he was very careful not to slip.

'Only fools fall down, knowing what waits for them below. I would never…'

As if to answer his thought, a gust of wind suddenly crashed into him from the side, and a distant bolt of lightning illuminated the sky.

'...To hell with this!'

Not wishing to tempt fate, Sunny dove into the shadows and continued his journey as one of them.

Soon, he arrived on the Iron Hand Island.

The severed arm of the unknown metal giant was still there, making Sunny wonder once again what force could have torn it off the

creature's body. Judging by the size of that thing, the owner of the arm must have been of monstrous proportions itself. Not really on the same scale as the walking colossus of the Forgotten Shore, but still undeniably gigantic.

The remains of the winged demon that had swallowed the mysterious coins were there, too.

However, they did not look the same.

By now, only the bones of the fearsome abomination remained, all its flesh long devoured by the gluttonous scavengers of the nightmare world. The grass around the carcass was now higher, too, and had changed its color from the usual green to bright red.

The grass looked… satiated.

Sunny grimaced.

Out here in the Dream Realm, no creature or plant was really what they seemed. Otherwise, the thick forest on the island where he had battled the pack of Fallen Wolves would have been long ago destroyed by the Crushing.

Even the most innocent things were twisted, corrupted, and predatory. Without sufficient caution, even a blade of grass could be deadly.

…But he wanted those coins.

Approaching the wide patch of bloodred grass, Sunny hesitated for a bit, and then took a step forward. He felt the ground moving slightly beneath him, the rustling of the raindrops changing tone as they fell on the grass.

With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard and circulated his essence, sending it flowing furiously through the coils of the Soul Serpent. He also collected both his shadows and wrapped them around his body.

The grass swayed slightly, and then grew still.

A subtle smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

Indeed, everything in the Dream Realm was dangerous and deadly… including humans. In fact, Awakened were perhaps one of the most fearsome tribes of creatures in this world, if not in terms of raw power, then at least due to their cunning, wickedness, and unpredictability.

For something as weak as a blade of grass, it was wise to avoid angering one of the Awakened, especially one as dreadful as Sunny.

'Ah. It feels nice to be feared.'

With nothing threatening him anymore, he walked over to the spot where he had seen the coins last and bent down, trying to find the alluring golden disks.

They were just where he had left them.

Chapter-401: Clueless

The acid stored in the demon's stomach had melted the grass, but now, new blades were already rising from the ground, taller than before. It took Sunny some time to find the coins between them… the rain did not help, either. But in the end, he discovered all three.

The coins were identical to the first one: they were cast from gold and heavy, a beautiful wooden ship with a tree growing around its mast depicted on one side and the face of the mysterious stranger on the other.

Hiding the coins in his pack, Sunny wiped the rainwater off his face and looked at the remains of the winged demon. In a flash of lightning, he saw the whole creature, red grass growing through its white bones, darkness nesting in the empty eye sockets, terrifying fangs crowding the massive, powerful jaws.

Even in death, the creature looked frightening.

'Where have you come from, ugly?'

With a sigh, Sunny looked at the sky, allowing rain to pelt him in the face for a while. Whatever little chance he had of tracking the flying abomination by following the trail of its blood was now gone. What else could he do?

Closing his eyes for a moment, Sunny walked a few steps and retrieved a piece of gnawed wood from the mud. Just as he had remembered, it resembled a broken corner of a chest, with a strip of metal reinforcing the seam. Both the strip of metal and the wood itself had been violently torn from the rest of the chest, it seemed, by the bite of the dead demon.

Which meant one thing… there had to be at least one chest full of mysterious coins somewhere out there, probably.

But how was Sunny supposed to find it? The Chained Isles was a vast land, full of numerous dangers and hidden places. All he knew about the creature was that it had been mortally wounded by the dwellers of the Dark Side and then succumbed to the Crushing.

Speaking of the Crushing… the rattling of chains thundered in the distance, announcing that the Iron Hand Island was entering the ascent phase. Sunny had to leave this place quickly. The next time he returned, the bones of the demon would most likely already be turned to dust.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny walked over to the skull of the abomination and dislodged one of its fangs with a powerful kick. Picking up the jagged bone dagger, he studied it for a few moments, and then put it in his pack.

If all else failed, he would try to find an Awakened with affinity to revelations and convince them to perform a divination upon the fang.

There was one person capable of something like that on the Chained Isles, at least. But… Sunny wasn't really willing to request help from that particular seer. Not unless there was no other choice at all.

'We're not there yet.'

Banishing the dark thoughts out of his mind, Sunny threw a last glance at the dead demon and the surrounding area, trying to see if he had missed a clue. However, there was nothing.

With a troubled look on his face, he dissipated into the shadows and hurried back to the Sanctuary.

***

By the time he returned to the Sanctuary, dawn was not that far away. Sunny snuck on the Altar Island and placed two of the three coins on the cold surface of the stone monolith, then waited for a bit.

Nothing happened.

'Huh.'

Disappointed, he waited patiently for the moon to appear from beneath the dark veil of clouds. After some time, the Sanctuary was finally illuminated by pale moonlight, and two coins on the altar immediately gleamed, reflecting it. Then, they shone with a soft light of their own.

The coin he held up in his hand, however, did not.

A moment later, the Spell whispered, its voice entwined with the rustle of the leaves and the murmur of flowing water:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'So, both the altar and the moon are needed.'

Hurriedly, he placed the third coin on the altar, and soon heard the Spell repeat itself for the third time:

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'That… should bring me to two hundred and one.'

And also… was he seeing things, or had the obsidian dagger moved ever so slightly?

With a skeptical frown, Sunny tried to lift the damned knife, but just as before, nothing he did had any effect on it.

'Ugh, whatever!'

His recent discovery was enough of a reward in and of itself. He had received four shadow fragments — the equivalent of killing a Fallen Monster — without having to risk his life one bit. On its own, this amount was not that considerable… but what if he found a thousand, or even a few hundred of these miraculous coins?

What if he reached the treasury where the chest bitten into by the winged demon was hidden?

That… would change a lot.

The problem was, Sunny had no idea where to look.

Pacing back and forth, he thought for a while, and then said to himself:

"I should probably find an expert on all things Chained Isles."

Somebody who might know about this type of Nightmare Creature, their behavior, and usual haunts… somebody who had spent long years in this region of the Dream Realm and was friendly enough to talk to Sunny.

'Now who do I know who fits into all these criteria?'

Sunny stopped pacing, lingered for a few moments, and then turned his head to the ring of massive menhirs.

A strange expression appeared on his face.

***

In the early morning, a lone figure approached the hallway leading to the White Feather clan's residence.

Saint Tyris and her people occupied the northern part of the Sanctuary's interior. Sunny had no idea what went on there, since he had never been invited, but he knew that both entrances to their compound were usually guarded.

Today was not an exception.

Before Sunny could step foot inside the hallway, a young warrior in a cuirass decorated with etchings of hawk feathers appeared from an alcove and glanced at him with a vigilant expression.

"State your business, Awakened."

Sunny stared at the young man with an earnest expression, then smiled.

"Oh! I am here to see Master Roan. He once told me to come find him if I need anything. So… here I am. In need of something. Can you fetch him really quick?"

The guard blinked a couple of times, then frowned:

"What is this about, exactly?"

Sunny grinned, lingered for a few moments, and then said honestly:

"...Demon hunting."

Chapter-402: Chain Worm

Sunny had no idea if Master Roan was currently in the Sanctuary, but judging by the fact that the guard did not immediately send him away, he probably was.

The young Awakened gave Sunny an evaluating look, then whistled softly and returned to his alcove. Nothing seemed to happen for a few minutes, but then, Sunny heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

A young woman wearing a simple white garment appeared from behind the curve of the corridor and glanced at him, then gestured for him to follow.

Sunny shifted slightly, then moved forward, walking behind the girl.

'What would you know? I am walking into the lair of a Legacy clan of my own free will. Never say never, I guess…'

He had really never expected himself to do something like this any time soon.

Instead of walking further into the compound, they entered a narrow staircase and ascended to the very top of the Sanctuary. There, massive stone monoliths lay flat on top of the menhirs, creating an almost uninterrupted surface.

There was a whole separate world above the Citadel, as it turned out. Grass and moss covered the expansive stone circle, which stretched far into the distance. Sunny could see guards standing at the outer edge of it, keeping watch on the neighboring islands. Here and there, siege weapons were placed at irregular intervals, aimed at the sky.

Right above the White Feather residence, a graceful structure was built on top of the ring of menhirs. With tall windows and beautiful ivy climbing its walls, it resembled a large stone chateau. The walls

of the mansion were still wet from rain and shone softly in the light of the rising sun.

A path led from its door to an airy pavilion at the edge of the stone monolith, with a round table standing in its center.

The mighty griffin was laying near the pavilion, its head hidden under one of the eagle wings, while Master Roan himself seemed to be enjoying a hearty breakfast inside.

The young woman gestured for Sunny to go forward and walked toward the mansion, soon disappearing behind its door.

'...I guess this is how Saints live.'

For a moment, Sunny was full of envy. The chateau on top of the Sanctuary seemed so beautiful, simple, and peaceful… the complete opposite of the noisy, overcrowded, and poisoned world where humans came from.

Of course, that peace was a lie. The Dream Realm might have seemed like a paradise sometimes, but that paradise was dire and twisted, hiding all kinds of horrors that were ready to descend upon you at any moment.

'Whatever. My house is much better, anyway. It has all a man can need, and then some… I bet they don't even have designer lamps here…'

...Pitiful, really.

Entering the pavilion, Sunny greeted Master Roan with all respect he could muster. The older man smiled and invited Sunny to sit with a relaxed gesture.

"Good morning, Sunless. I must admit, I didn't expect you to seek me out so soon. Did something happen?"

Sunny sat down, smiled politely, then shook his head.

"Nothing that I would want to concern you with. You see… I am not here to talk about something that happened, but more about

something that might happen."

Master Roan raised an eyebrow and laughed:

"Don't tell me… wait… are you here with a business proposal? Am I about to become a customer of Sunny's Brilliant Emporium?"

Sunny choked.

"Uh… no. What? Where did you hear about that?"

The handsome Master grinned.

"I hear things."

'What are those bastards saying behind my back?!'

Sunny forced out a smile, then shook his head.

"No, no. I am not here as a highly respected, rich, and famous entrepreneur. Nor am I here as a well-regarded member of the Wilderness Survival faculty of the Awakened Academy. I am actually here as an advanced scout of the Sanctuary of Noctis."

Master Roan grew serious.

"Oh. Continue."

Sunny nodded, then hesitated for a bit, and finally said:

"After we parted two days ago, I returned to the Sanctuary. On my way back, however, I rested for a while on the Iron Hand Island. And there… well, I found the remains of a Nightmare Creature there."

The older man frowned slightly.

"That's not unheard of. Iron Hand is usually safe, but you know how Chained Isles are. Nightmare Creatures migrate, sometimes naturally, sometimes to avoid the Crushing."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"That's true. However, the abomination was a Fallen Demon. It is

strange to see one that close to the Sanctuary, and especially so because I have never seen or even heard about that type of creature. It was rather scary."

Roan's frown deepened.

"A Fallen Demon on the Iron Hand Island? That is indeed strange. You've done well to bring me this information, Sunless. Did you get a good look at it, by any chance?"

Sunny sighed.

"Well, you see, it was in the depths of night."

Then, he smiled.

"...But, luckily, I can see perfectly in the dark! So, yes. I got a very good look. Let me describe it…"

He described the demon to the best of his ability, not sparing any detail. He even remembered every wound and injury on the abomination's body, hoping that their nature can shine a light on what exactly had killed the bastard.

The longer Sunny talked, the darker Master Roan's face became. Finishing his report, Sunny glanced at the older man and asked:

"So… what type of a demon was that, exactly? And why have I never encountered one before?"

Master Roan shook his head.

"You are lucky to have never met one of these fiends, kid. They are a very rare and vicious breed of Nightmare Creatures, known as Chain Worms. Luckily, it was already dead. Otherwise, I doubt that we would be having this conversation right now. Even I am reluctant to face a demon such as this alone. No offense, Sunless, but if that thing was alive, you would have ended up as its dinner."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then asked cautiously:

"Chain Worms? Why are they called that?"

The older man sighed, then looked at the breathtaking vista of the Chained Isles in front of them.

After a while, he said:

"It is because these creatures feed on metal. Once one of the heavenly chains is weakened, they appear from the Dark Side to feast on it. Steel weapons are useless against these abominable things, so fighting one, let alone many, is almost an impossible task."

Master Roan stared into the distance with a bleak expression, and then added darkly:

"I've seen whole islands crumble into the Below because of their hunger…"

Chapter-403: Sky Tide

Master Roan grew silent for a few moments, then smiled after noticing Sunny's troubled expression:

"The heavenly chains near the Sanctuary are all fine, though. So you have nothing to worry about."

'That's not what I am worried about…'

Sunny had already received a piece of valuable information that could help him find the mysterious treasure. But he wanted to know more…

Before he could ask another question, however, a sudden shadow shrouded the pavilion, the stone chateau, and the expanse of weathered stone surrounding it — as though a cloud moved across the sun, hiding it.

The sleeping griffin stirred and raised its head, its vertical pupils narrowing.

Just a moment later, the shadow disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Simultaneously, a strange sound reached Sunny's ears — it was as though a thousand wings rustled as they cut the air.

Then, a woman was suddenly standing at the edge of the stone ring, her silhouette outlined against the rising sun by a bright halo.

It seemed as though she had always been there, but Sunny could swear that there was no one near them just a second ago.

'Oh…'

The woman was tall and slender, her posture straight like an arrow. She was wearing a light steel armor, its pauldrons and greaves

decorated with white feathers. Her long blond hair was fluttering in the wind like a cascade of pale gold.

When she turned around, Sunny saw two piercing amber eyes staring at him, and shivered. Her face was cold and stunningly beautiful, more akin to that of a goddess than of a human being.

…The woman's pupils were narrow and vertical, exactly like those of the mighty griffin.

The ruler of the Sanctuary had returned home.

'Crap!'

With a shudder, Sunny forced himself to look away and hurriedly bowed.

This was his second time meeting Tyris of the White Feather clan, also known by her True Name, Sky Tide… one of the few Saints of the human race, the demigod in charge of the Chained Island.

Just by virtue of existing, the Saint exerted a strange influence on everything that surrounded her. It was not oppressive, like the dreadful aura of Gunlaug's golden armor, just… different. As if the world itself was reacting to her.

The blades of grass seemed to bent slightly toward her, the winds sang subtly lower as she approached, and even sunlight appeared to become a bit brighter in her presence.

Master Roan shifted and rose from his seat.

"Good morning, sunshine!"

Sunny flinched.

'Uh… what?'

It took him a couple of seconds to realize that the fearless griffin rider was addressing his wife, and not him.

'Sunshine… sunshine?!'

Is that how he addressed a Saint?!

'Well, she is his wife, after all. I guess?'

Once he thought about it, everything made sense. But still, the idea of addressing a Transcendent as "sunshine" seemed very weird, for some reason.

Sunny cautiously looked up and saw a wide smile on Roan's face. Saint Tyris herself, however, was as cold as ever.

"Good morning, Ro."

Even her voice was cold and heavy, like the howl of an approaching storm.

Turning her head slightly, Saint Tyris looked at Sunny with a silent question.

…Countless poets would have been ruined if they saw the elegant curve of her eyebrow.

'Huh… wow... wait, what am I thinking about?'

Master Roan patted Sunny on the shoulder and said:

"Awakened Sunless visited to tell me about a demon he encountered on the Iron Hand Island. It was a Chain Worm… already dead, fortunately. Still, we should explore the nearby island. Don't you think?"

Saint Tyris lingered for a few moments, then shook her head.

"No need. The only failing chain on the Isles is far away from the Sanctuary, connecting Shipwreck Island to the Twisted Rock. This is where the Chain Worm came from. I just saw it myself."

She turned away, then sighed slightly.

"Of course, we will have to prepare. All islands are connected, after all. After the Twisted Rock falls, its demise will echo through the entire region. Many islands will shift, causing changes to the severity

of the Crushing on others. The migrations patterns of the Nightmare Creatures will be affected, too."

'I should probably get going.'

Sunny cleared his throat, then said awkwardly:

"Uh… it's been an honor to meet you again, Lady Tyris. I… uh… shall take my leave, then."

Sky Tide nodded indifferently, then said:

"Thank you for informing us of your finding, Awakened Sunless."

He nodded, then rose from his seat and cautiously took a few steps away.

When Sunny was almost out of the pavilion, however, the cold voice of the Saint stopped him:

"Wait."

He turned around and forced out a smile:

"Yes? How can I help you?"

Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then said in a calm, emotionless tone:

"You come from the Forgotten Shore, if I am not mistaken."

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. What about it?"

The beautiful Saint lingered for a second, then asked:

"Song of the Fallen... do you know her?"

'Cassie? Why bring her up?'

Sunny smiled.

"Yes. We've met. Why?"

Saint Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then said:

"Good. Song of the Fallen will be visiting the Sanctuary soon. She will be glad to see a familiar face, I think."

With that, Sky Tide turned away, letting Sunny know that he was free to go.

He hesitated for a second, then walked away.

As soon as neither Master Roan nor Saint Tyris could see his face, a dark expression appeared on it.

'Coming to visit… what the hell is she coming here for?'

***

Indeed, just like Sunny, Cassie had chosen Chained Isles as the region to anchor herself to. Their reason was most likely also the same — the proximity of the Isles to the Hollow Mountains.

Luckily, she was not a resident of the Sanctuary. Sunny had no idea how the blind girl had managed it, but she somehow convinced clan Valor to let her and her cohort anchor themselves to the second human Citadel in the region, the Night Temple.

While Sanctuary was closer to the southern border of the region, Night Temple was situated far to the north, almost on the outskirts of the misty Death Zone.

For that reason, the two of them had been comfortably separated and had not seen each other even once in the past months.

But now, that was about to change.

Exiting the White Feather residence, Sunny grimaced.

'Glad to see a familiar face? Hell. I doubt it…'

Chapter-404: Soft Life

The Sanctuary was slowly waking up. Now that the sun had risen, groups of Awakened were preparing to venture outside, while those who had stuff to do in the Citadel itself were going about their business. A few of them greeted Sunny as he walked toward the Altar Island.

By now, he should have been able to return to the real world. After everything he had discovered during the night, there was a flame burning inside his chest that demanded action. His eyes gleamed when he thought about the mysterious treasure hidden somewhere out there, in the darkness.

But, although Sunny was a very rapacious person, he knew how to keep his avarice in check… well, most of the time.

'Shipwreck Island…'

Sunny had never been that far away from the Sanctuary, but he had heard about that deadly place.

The Shipwreck Island was situated almost at the center of the Chained Isles, far removed from both human Citadels. The Nightmare Creatures there were especially ferocious, and the islands themselves were far more bizarre and dangerous than those closer to the edges of the region.

If one could somehow survive the Crushing and look upon the Chained Isles from above, they would see that there was a vast empty space at the very heart of this shattered land. Some people assumed that this was where the Ivory Tower had once been chained, before all seven of its anchors were broken.

After that, the islands bordering the Tear slowly fell into the Sky Below one after another, making it grow wider and wider.

The hole at the heart of the Chained Isles was slowly expanding, and one day, thousands of years from now, it was probably going to devour the whole region.

…But Sunny had no interest in that remote future.

What concerned him right now was that the Shipwreck Island was on the very edge of the Tear, and as such, presented a lot of danger for a young Awakened like him. If Sunny wanted to venture out that far, he would have to study and thoroughly prepare for a long and perilous expedition.

And in the meantime, he had to hurry to the real world.

Even though he felt the call of treasure with every fiber of his being, desperate to reduce the gap between himself and Nephis, the things he had to do back in reality were… crucial.

'Calm down. It's nothing serious, really.'

Approaching the white altar, he glanced at the obsidian dagger suspiciously, then placed his hand on the cold marble.

'There's no reason to worry, so...'

***

The lid of the steel sarcophagus silently opened, letting out beams of light and clouds of cool mist. Sunny yawned and climbed out of the sleeping pod, then stretched with a satisfied smile on his lips.

His body felt refreshed and energized, as if he just had a long, perfectly comfortable sleep — not at all like what he had to endure in the past two months while using cheaper Academy pods.

'Now that… is what I call money well spent.'

Indeed, the luxurious machine might have been the best purchase he had ever made. Not counting the Mantle of the Underworld, of course…

Leaving the compact underground fortress of his basement, Sunny

walked over to the kitchen, glanced at the broken remains of his fridge with a bit of shame, and retrieved a few ingredients to cook himself breakfast from the debris.

Out here in the real world, it was currently early morning. He sent the happy shadow outside to observe the surroundings, and then turned on the stove.

Real eggs, real lettuce and tomatoes, real bread, real bacon, real coffee, real juice… it took him just a few minutes to cook himself a breakfast that would have been considered the epitome of a lavish lifestyle by any inhabitant of the outskirts.

Walking to a dining table that was too large for one person, he placed his breakfast on its synthwood surface and activated his communicator.

There were no new messages, and he didn't really know what else to do with that thing. Usually, people of his age would have an active presence on the network and feeds breaking with all kinds of news, events, and videos, but Sunny had almost no digital presence whatsoever. Nor did he want to have one, really.

He knew how to access various resources and services, of course, and many of the things on the network had once been the stuff of his dreams: the unlimited amount of games, books, shows, and entertainment of all sorts was on the tip of his finger.

But, ironically, now that Sunny had free access to all these alluring things, he had no time to dive into any of them. Right now, he had too much to do, and his dreams were filled with only clangor of steel and nightmarish abominations.

'Maybe one day…'

Slowly consuming his food, Sunny used the communicator to quickly sketch and describe the coin he had found... keeping its true secrets to himself, of course.

Outside, his neighbors were preparing to face the new day. The sun was rising above the giant city, and crowds of people were on their

way to work.

The shadow found a hidden spot on the porch of his new home and observed the quiet street from its shelter. It saw a few PTVs drive by, humming slowly as they rolled or levitated toward the exit from the terrace district. Several well-dressed adults walked by, heading for the public transport terminal.

Some time later, it was time for the students in school uniforms to follow them.

Sunny sipped coffee and observed these children through the shadow, trying to imagine himself having such a life.

Waking up in a safe home. Eating the delicious food a parent had prepared for you, not having to think about where your next meal would come from. Going to a place where an unlimited amount of knowledge and mentorship was available to you, completely free. Having no real worries and no real fears.

Just… living.

What a strange existence that would be…

He stared at the students with a complicated expression. They were so… soft. Their clothes were soft, their eyes were soft, and their lives, too, were soft.

How were these children going to survive the real world? The real world was hard, cruel, and unforgiving. Just like Sunny himself was. A person like him had a much better chance of surviving in such a world.

Not to mention the hellscapes of the Dream Realm.

Finally, the stream of students grew thin.

One of the last to walk past Sunny's house was a young girl of around fourteen years. She was about as tall as him, with pale skin and black hair. The girl seemed to be a bit uncomfortable in her own body, like all teenagers tended to be, and the school uniform did no favors to her slender physique.

Her dark eyes, however, were very sharp and clear.

…Luckily, unlike her brother, Rain seemed to have taken after their mother, who was a rather attractive young woman from what Sunny remembered. Even though she was still just a child, he could already see that one day, the teenage girl walking past his home was going to become a real beauty.

Finishing his coffee, Sunny placed the empty cup on the table and sighed.

'...Found you.'

Chapter-405: Going Back to School

Indeed, the awkward fourteen-year-old girl was his little sister, Rain.

And indeed, it wasn't a coincidence that Sunny had bought this exact house in this exact district of the city. While the terrace neighborhood was nice and charming, the real reason he had chosen this home, in particular, was because it stood next to the place where Rain lived.

It was on this street, a year and a few months ago, that he had watched from the shadows as she was having dinner with her adopted family, their warm and happy life displayed for him to see through the wide window of their brightly illuminated living room.

…Well, now Sunny had a living room and a wide window of his own, even though there was usually only darkness behind it.

Back then, he had become painfully aware that his fantasy of saving his little sister was empty and misguided. Rain didn't need to be saved, least of all by a troubled outskirt stray like him... a ghost of the past that she most likely did not even remember. If he had knocked on her door on that night, nothing in her life would have changed for the better.

Sunny wasn't the same penniless kid anymore. He was an Awakened, one marked as a special strategic asset by the government. He was considerably wealthy, connected… even powerful.

But, deep down, he still believed that the statement held true. His clothes and circumstances might have changed, but Sunny himself remained the same. Twisted and damaged, like anyone who had seen the truth of this world would be.

What's worse, now that he had risen above his previous pathetic self, he had a whole swarm of new, much more serious problems. Nephis, the Sovereigns, the legacy of mysterious Weaver… all of these things promised a future full of turmoil and danger. He was not exactly the kind of person who had good things to offer to anybody.

So, no. Sunny had not changed his mind about keeping himself out of Rain's life. He wasn't going to approach her, and had no desire to meet her face to face.

...There was, however, a problem.

Now that Sunny was an Awakened, statistically, Rain's chances of becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell herself had grown. But even if he forgot about that statistical correlation, there was still a possibility that she would end up in the First Nightmare, no matter how small.

By now, Sunny was eighteen, and Rain was fourteen. Almost every person infected by the Spell had fallen victim to it while being older than sixteen and younger than nineteen, which meant that there were about two years left before Rain would be in real danger, and about four before she would be out of it.

Even if they were more or less strangers and didn't owe anything to each other, Sunny felt... responsible for her. Perhaps Rain did not remember him due to how little she had been at the time of their separation, but he remembered everything. To him, she was the last memento of their long-lost home.

Now that he had the ability to pull some strings behind the scenes to ensure that her chances of surviving the First Nightmare were enhanced — be it through access to better battle instructors or something else — he couldn't just sit still and do nothing.

But to do that, he first needed to understand how well Rain was being prepared already.

Hence, he bought a house near the place where she lived and let his shadows loose to explore the neighborhood and spy on her and her family.

'Uh… when I put it that way, it sure sounds a bit creepy.'

Sunny stood up, yawned, and shrugged. He was an Awakened whose power lay in shadows, deceit, and bloodshed. Before that, he was a street rat willing to do anything in order to survive. Mundane humans had no idea about what he had gone through, what he had done, and what he was capable of as the result.

If they did, they would probably be horrified. So, a little hint of creepiness was only to be expected.

Putting on a warm hoody, he walked outside, hid his hands in his pockets, and headed toward the public transport terminal at a slow pace.

His shadow was a few hundred meters ahead, stealthily following Rain and keeping an eye on her. No one was the wiser to its presence.

Sunny sighed and looked at the cloudy sky.

'Time to go to school, I guess.'

***

Rain went to a rather elite school, as it turned out. Judging by the prices of the homes in the terrace district, Sunny knew that her adopted family was reasonably well-to-do, but it seemed that he had underestimated either their wealth or their connections.

The school was not the most prestigious out there, but it was close. Enough that only the kids of government officials and conglomerate heirs attended it… for the most part, of course. There were a few kids who seemed to be there because of their academic achievements, but not enough to make a difference.

The children of government servants arrived on public transport, like Rain; the chaebols came in expensive PTVs, which were controlled by personal drivers.

Sitting at a table in a cafe a kilometer or so away from the heavily guarded entrance to the school, Sunny suppressed the desire to whistle.

'That's… like something out of a drama. I wonder if I'll see someone getting slapped in the face today…'

Suddenly remembering his first encounter with Master Jet, Sunny coughed and rubbed his cheek in embarrassment.

The happy shadow was still following Rain, stealthily moving from one shadowy patch to another. Then, it waited for a good opportunity and dove inside the shadow of one of the kids walking toward the same classroom as her.

Sunny got comfortable and ordered a few pastries and a pot of tea.

He couldn't quite believe that he was going to waste time attending school, of all things, even if it was in that very strange manner. He hadn't been to school in a dozen years already, not counting the month spent in the Academy.

'Well… this should be interesting.'

Chapter-406: Educated Guess

A couple of hours later, Sunny was ready to claw his eyes out.

Not because the lessons taught to Rain in school were boring, but because he had to watch a bunch of entitled kids exist in an enclosed space and make it as hard for everyone to learn anything as possible.

The elite school seemed like a place of learning, but in fact, it was more like a battlefield. The hidden politics among the students and the hierarchy of numerous cliques they formed were more complex than the ruthless strife between the factions in the Bright Castle, and judging by their behavior, just as dire.

…But it was not.

No one's life was at stake, no one was going to be exiled and starve to death if they did a wrong thing. All of this was simply about prestige, vanity, and standing.

It was utterly stupid!

However, once Sunny thought about it a bit more, he realized that it was not. Not to them, and maybe not at all.

These kids were put under immense pressure, assigned a numerical value, and forced to compete with each other. As the result, they inevitably developed a fierce sense of resentment toward their rivals, which was only made deeper by the deep sense of insecurity this system instilled in them.

No wonder they were at each other's throats.

The school was, in fact, not only meant to teach the kids the skills necessary to survive and thrive in the real world, but also to destroy the very same softness Sunny had pondered about a few hours

earlier.

It wasn't hard to imagine that, at the end of it all, the best and most resilient students would become harsh and jaded, while the rest would simply be broken and discarded.

A wasteful system, and one of very questionable effectiveness.

Sipping tea in the quiet cafe, Sunny shook his head.

'Rich people…'

Luckily for him, Rain seemed to be unaffected by the vitriol her classmates appeared to be more interested in than the actual studying. She sat calmly at the back of the class, avoiding getting embroiled in any drama, and dutifully learned everything the teachers explained to the students.

…The lessons themselves, surprisingly, turned out to be very interesting. Sunny even found himself enjoying these hours very much. There had not been any combat lessons yet, but he did manage to catch this school's version of the Wilderness Survival course, as well as listen to a rather intriguing lecture about the early exploration of the Dream Realm.

He also saw a lesson dedicated to various Nightmare Creatures, their biology, capabilities, and weaknesses.

If he had known that much during his first months on the Forgotten Shore… well, it would not have changed much, really. No matter how much a person knew about these things, no Sleeper was meant to face challenges of that magnitude.

And yet, he couldn't help but feel a bit wistful. He had been denied access to this treasury of knowledge as a kid. Who knew how his life would have turned out otherwise? It would have been a lot more interesting and enjoyable, at least.

By then, he had some idea of Rain's depth of knowledge and overall readiness for the Nightmare Spell, but he still did not know how well she was really being trained. He had to see her during a lesson in combat for that.

After a while, Sunny had become a little bit bored. Listening to a lecture about spelltech absentmindedly, he looked around the cafe.

At this hour, there weren't a lot of people there, but that was swiftly changing. The white-collar workers from the surrounding buildings were now on their lunch break, as were senior students of the school. Several noisy groups were occupying tables near him, so he couldn't help but catch bits and pieces of their conversations.

"No way! When is it coming out?"

"In a couple of months, I think."

"Who will play the female lead, then? No, wait! Let me guess…"

These guys were apparently discussing some upcoming film, excitedly wondering about the casting. Something about their conversation appeared strange to Sunny, but he didn't pay it too much attention.

"...none. That is the mindset of a true battle master!"

"No way he meant to say that. Who do you think Lord Mongrel is, a nobody? Of course not! He only said that because he considers social status and renown meaningless. In the eyes of a warrior, such things are not even worth mentioning. The only thing that matters is your strength!

That's why he hides his noble upbringing."

Sunny stared at the couple of young men that were in the middle of a heated debate, then shook his head.

'That's hilarious. What are the chances?'

Apparently, there was someone else out there with a similar alias. And that guy, from what Sunny could hear, was not only a total buffoon, but also went around calling himself a Lord, pretending to be some wise philosopher and teaching people how to be a "true warrior".

'What an idiot… well, figures. Only an idiot would choose such an alias on purpose, after all. I wonder what this guy's problem is? He

has to be horribly insecure about something, for sure…'

Then, however, he had to focus on Rain again, because she was finally heading for the school's dojo.

The combat lesson was about to begin.

The instructor, surprisingly, turned out to be an actual Awakened. It was a man in his late thirties, with a mighty build and cold eyes of an experienced fighter. Sunny couldn't tell what Aspect the man possessed, but he was obviously not a sheltered non-combatant.

Rain's instructor was the real deal. He had to have enough money to never be required to work a single day in the real world, so the fact that he was teaching a bunch of kids in a school meant that he was doing it either because of his principles or because of an obligation to one of their parents.

In any case, it was a good thing for Rain.

In the next hour or so, Sunny watched the students train and fight each other with various weapons. He expected them to use fake ones, but to his surprise, the Awakened instructor insisted that the kids both wore heavy protective gear and wielded real ones, even if the weapons were blunted to not pose a real danger.

'Good approach, I guess.'

Rain's level was… better than he had expected. Not comparable to someone like Caster or Nephis, of course, but miles better than anything he would have been able to do at her age. She was swift, nimble, and strategic, utilizing every opening the opponent presented to her full advantage.

She seemed to prefer using ranged combat, but could hold her own in a melee with the help of a wide range of weapons, from a long spear to a light saber. There were kids who were better than her, and those who were worse, but none who could compare to her in terms of wits.

And yet, a deep frown appeared on his face.

'There is one thing that is lacking.'

…Viciousness.

His sister was not nearly vicious enough.

Chapter-407: Dreamscape Qualifications

Judging that he had seen everything he needed to, Sunny rose and left the cafe, then headed home. The happy shadow left the premises of the school, unnoticed, and soon wrapped itself around his body... but not before showing how proud and satisfied it was with its flawless performance.

'Yeah, yeah. You did well.'

On his way back, Sunny was thinking over what he had learned about Rain. His sister seemed to be smart and well-adjusted, and receiving the kind of training most kids in this world could only dream about.

But was it enough?

He did not know. No one could know, really.

After he had returned from the Forgotten Shore, several people told him that they would have never survived in that hell. But their words rang hollow to Sunny, because how would they know? Until a person was thrown into a situation like that, there was no way to tell what would remain of their resolve once everything else had been stripped away.

Brave people broke, while cowardly ones found strength that they had not even known was inside them. Kind people became cruel, while cruel people became lost. Only by looking at a mirror of a nightmare could one truly see their real face.

Before Sunny entered the Forgotten Shore, he had thought himself to be strong. But once there, he had to learn the hard way that his strength was brittle and illusory, that it could shatter under the

smallest amount of pressure. To survive, he had to build within himself a new kind of strength, one that could not be broken by anything, or anyone.

That was how he had survived.

How was he supposed to know how Rain would measure against the horrors of the Spell? And how was he supposed to make her chances of surviving its trials better?

Consumed by these thoughts, Sunny returned home and tried to put his mind at ease.

This was not something that he could decide in a hurry, anyway. For now, he had many other things to do.

Activating the Dreamscape pod, Sunny climbed inside and closed his eyes.

'Time to relax a little…'

At least out there in the Dreamscape, things were simple. He just had to fight, learn, and win.

…Granted, his previous visit to the Colosseum had turned out to be a fiasco. But Sunny had high hopes for more elite arenas. He just had to gain enough victories to enter them — about seventy more to gain access to the lower-ranked professional dreams.

Not that hard...

He had lost all interest in dueling with amateurs, and couldn't wait to meet better opponents who could teach him a variety of polished styles.

'Ah, better do it quickly.'

Appearing on the sand of the Colosseum, Sunny sighed behind the mask and willed the Soul Serpent to assume the form of the somber odachi.

'Huh… that's weird.'

For some reason, today, many more people wanted to challenge him. A literal crowd of Awakened assembled around Sunny in a span of a minute, staring at him with disturbing intensity. Also, the challengers seemed to be way more talkative…

'What's up with these fools?'

"Hey, Mongrel! What is your real name?"

Sunny stared at the young woman challenging him, then answered with slight irritation:

"Mongrel."

She smiled knowingly, as if struck by a mysterious epiphany, then asked:

"What style do you practice?"

Sunny frowned behind the mask.

"I practice no style."

The girl opened her mouth to say something else, but he interrupted her by stepping forward and activating the challenge.

Two seconds later, the girl's dead body was already turning into a rain of sparks.

'Why are they so chatty today? I don't have a lot of time. If I want to enter a professional arena next time, I have to be fast…'

Looking at the crowd of Awakened, Sunny sighed dejectedly and growled:

"Words are worthless, silence is gold. Don't waste my breath!"

The challengers looked at each other with weirdly enlightened expressions, then grew quiet.

'That's better! At least they're an understanding bunch.'

Now that people seemed to have lost their desire to chat uselessly

before every damn duel, things went much faster. Sunny had no plans of copying the styles of these talented amateurs today, so he could be as efficient as possible.

It required him to really exert himself, though. They were all Awakened, after all… each and every one of them. Behind the black mask, Sunny was sweating an ocean and silently whispering curses.

But what could he do? He just had to get it done.

Because he took no breaks between the duels, his reserves of shadow essence grew dangerously low at some point. Sunny was forced to command the Soul Serpent to return to his body to accelerate the accumulation of essence and slow down its expenditure.

Noticing that he had dismissed his sword, the challengers assumed that he wasn't going to fight anymore and sighed with disappointment.

Glancing at them, Sunny gritted his teeth and hissed:

"Next!"

He was not that far from accomplishing his goal for today, and the Mantle of the Underworld was like a weapon itself. Especially if he manipulated its weight to make his blows carry the weight of a mountain… metaphorically speaking…

His aching muscles protested, but he endured the torment and continued.

'Just a few more…'

As the next challenger stepped forward, Sunny dashed toward him, deflected the glancing blow of a spiked mace with a vambrace, and struck the young man in the face with all the strength he could muster. The black onyx gauntlet grew terribly heavy as it flew through the air, connected solidly… and caused the young man's skull to explode, more or less.

Sunny secretly panted and cursed.

'That… uh… I can't keep this up much longer…'

Luckily, he only had a few more duels to win.

About an hour after he had entered the Colosseum, Sunny finally reached enough victories to qualify for a better arena. By then, he was so tired that he felt like throwing up.

'Goddammit… that was incredibly tough. All in day's work, I guess…'

Throwing one last glance at the crowd of silent Awakened, Sunny shook his head.

'What a bunch of weirdos…'

With that, he gave the Dreamscape the command and left the illusion, both exhausted and satisfied with his progress.

…Left alone on the sand of the Colosseum, the challengers remained quiet for a few minutes.

After a while, one of them said:

"He shook his head."

Another Awakened sighed heavily, then said in a solemn tone:

"Yes. We are not worthy enough…"

Chapter-408: Oh, No

Sunny crawled out of the simulation pod and lay on the cold floor for a while, breathing heavily.

'How come an illusory arena is so exhausting?'

The designers of the Dreamscape were really weird. The people who frequented the Colosseum were even weirder, though. Sunny couldn't even begin to understand the quirks of their behavior.

'That's how subcultures are, I guess?'

After a while, he stood up and went upstairs to make himself some food and replenish all the energy he had spent during this intense and taxing hour.

Sunny made himself a light dinner, devoured it with wolfish hunger, and then relaxed in a chair while drinking a cup of delicious tea.

As he rested, his communicator buzzed.

He took a sip of tea, then opened the message Effie had sent him.

"Hey doofus! Have you seen this? I think I found a new boyfriend for your girlfriend!"

The message ended with a winking emote and an attached video link.

Perplexed, Sunny clicked on the link… and spit out all of his tea.

Forgetting to wipe his chin, he stared at the holographic screen in front of him with wide eyes.

"What… what the hell is this?!"

The video was… of him.

Of his duel in the Dreamscape, to be precise.

***

Caught in stunning quality, the recording of his short duel against the young man in azure armor was playing on a loop, set to menacing and epic music. The caption read "Mongrel Victorious". Sunny stared at it for a while, then slowly lowered his gaze and looked at the view count beneath the video.

'S—seven… seven zeroes?!'

Was that Leo Striker guy someone famous?

Sunny only came to his senses because of the pressure of his Flaw. Gritting his teeth, he sent Effie a short message:

"I have not seen this."

'What the hell is happening?'

Feeling apprehensive, he went on the network and typed "Mongrel, Dreamscape" in the search bar. Immediately, thousands upon thousands of results showed, all featuring the fearsome image of Weaver's Mask.

Sunny gulped.

"Oh, no. Oh, no."

He opened the first link, and almost spat blood.

"Mongrel defeats Leo Striker, Daoist Saifer, and the Fool in three strikes!"

The short montage of a bunch of his duels played… this one had even more views.

'That doesn't even make sense. Were those two famous as well?! What three strikes, I hit the second guy twice…'

Feeling an approaching headache and a bit of panic, Sunny scrolled

through the feed, growing paler and paler with each second.

There were countless videos, captions, and discussions. Thousands of people were fervently debating his duels, his identity, and the hidden meaning of his words. It seemed as if they had somehow become convinced that he was some sort of a profound sage, going around spouting words of enlightened wisdom.

There were whole discussion boards dedicated to interpreting his "teachings"!

"Oh, no…"

Sunny grabbed his head, realizing that the buffoon he had heard being discussed in the cafe… was him! Come to think of it, many of Rain's classmates had been talking about this stuff, too.

Had she seen this garbage as well?

He groaned.

…At least no one seemed to have any idea about who Mongrel was. His efforts to obfuscate his identity were working, as was Weaver's Mask.

But the worst was still to come…

As Sunny was studying the mess he had made, new notifications started appearing in the feed.

"Mongrel returns!"

"Mongrel decimates the Colosseum!"

"Seventy victories in sixty minutes: Lord Mongrel's shocking rampage!"

"Mongrel is Saint [REDACTED]'s bastard son: CONFIRMED!"

He closed his eyes.

'...Gods. What is this crap?'

Opening a random link, he read in horror:

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "I was there, guys! It was incredible! He was like a natural disaster! So awesome…"

Random Shoe: "Did you hear what he said?"

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "Words are worthless, silence is gold! So profound. My whole outlook on life changed."

Random Shoe: "Wow, my dad used to tell me the same thing when I tried to talk to him after school."

Mongrel #1 Sympathiser: "Wait. Shoe… are you Mongrel's son?"

"User Random Shoe changed their name to Mongrel's Son"

Mongrel's Son: "Aren't we all Mongrel's children?"

Sunny closed the link and went to another page.

"Silence is Gold. One strike of a sword is worth more than a thousand words: an in-depth analysis of the postneonihilist philosophy of Mongrel."

'Postneo… what?'

Stupefied, he opened another link.

"Reacting to Mongrel's 70 wins! You gasp you lose!"

And another:

"Mongrel does not believe in styles. Styles only separate men..."

And another:

"I spent a night with Mongrel: a candid confession of a former idol trainee."

Deactivating the communicator, he sat quietly for a while, and then groaned again.

"Oh, no!"

***

The new recording of Mongrel's stunning performance in the Colosseum flew around the globe in no time at all. Starved for new information about the mysterious demonic fighter, people became glued to the screens of their communicators…

They were not disappointed by what they saw, to say the least.

Mongrel's already considerable renown — or infamy, depending on who you asked — became even more widespread.

Sunny had grown up in the outskirts, so he had never been really exposed both to the network culture and to the peculiar fanbase of the Dreamscape. That was why he had severely underestimated the effect his recent visit to the amateur arena would have on the people interested in these things.

He had only wanted to reach the number of victories required to access the professional duels as fast as possible, but failed to take into account how outstanding the feat of defeating seventy opponents in just one hour would look from the side.

…Especially considering the fact that he had killed the last half a dozen or so with his bare hands, not even bothering to use a weapon. These last few duels looked especially striking, impressive, and gruesome.

If before people called Mongrel a sword demon, now he had become just a demon in their eyes.

What's worse, even though it took all of his power and lots of effort for Sunny to achieve these victories, due to the fact that his face was always hidden behind the fearsome mask, he appeared to be completely calm and indifferent, as if defeating so many people in a row was nothing to him.

A walk in the park.

Added to the fact that he had dismissed his sword near the end of the

hour and then left after shaking his head, it seemed as though Mongrel was not only a demon, but also held all the rest of the duelists in utter contempt.

Mongrel was disappointed in them…

That disappointment ignited a fire in the hearts of many duelists of the Dreamscape, pushing them to train harder, reach higher, become stronger.

Mongrel's status was always in front of them, reminding these young men and women what they were striving to achieve:

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 100"

Defeats: 0"

And of course, all of them continued to wonder about his true identity.

Very soon, someone made a logical connection: an incredibly talented young warrior appeared in the Dreamscape soon after the hundred survivors of the Forgotten Shore returned to the real world, putting every Awakened there to shame.

Obviously, Mongrel was one of these hundred heroes!

But which one?

It didn't take people a lot of time to solve the mystery.

On one of the discussion boards on the network, an anonymous user wrote:

"Guys, isn't it obvious? Who is among the best of the best of the Forgotten Shore warriors, and also has a big reason to keep his identity a secret?"

Another answered:

"Wait… wait. You're right! It was right in front of us the whole time!"

And then, the shocking piece of news spread through the network as wildfire:

"Mongrel's true identity is…"

Kai of Nightingale!

Chapter-409: Treasure Hunt

"Night&Gale representative agency publishes an official statement: popular idol and fashion icon, Night, is NOT the controversial Dreamscape sensation, nor has he ever participated in any scandalous activities under the alias Mongrel…"

Sunny read the latest news title on the screen of his communicator and covered his face with a hand.

'Oh, gods…'

How did poor Kai end up being involved in this mess? Had the world gone completely insane?!

He stared at the message icon at the bottom of the screen nervously, half-expecting to receive an angry message from his friend. Or was it up to Sunny to apologize in advance? Kai had seen him purchasing the Mantle of the Underworld, after all.

Even though the onyx armor did not look the same as it had before being repaired and turning from pure stone to the strange stonelike metal, there was a possibility that he would recognize it…

'Ugh. Why is life so hard?'

Sunny shook his head resentfully and stared at the ceiling.

...And then there was the issue of Rain.

Sunny had watched her walk home through the eyes of the shadow, and was once again consumed by uncertainty. Did he need to intervene? What was the best way to help her? Did she even require his help?

There was no easy answer to any of these questions.

He turned off the communicator, sat in the darkness for a while, then stood up and went to the kitchen. Retrieving all the things that could spoil quickly from the ruined refrigerator, Sunny cooked himself a decadent dinner and ate in tense silence.

'...To hell with this. I'll deal with all these problems after returning from the Shipwreck Island… it shouldn't take me that long to reach it, investigate, and come back anyway. A week at most…'

Why waste time on all this nonsense when there was a treasure waiting for him in the Dream Realm?

Sunny had already retrieved all the pertinent information he could find from the Academy database. All Awakened had some level of access to the base of shared knowledge about the Dream Realm and the Nightmare Creatures, and due to his position as the research assistant assigned to the Wilderness Survival faculty, he had more than most.

It wasn't really enough to venture on such a dangerous expedition, but at least gave him a basic understanding of what to expect. The rest he was going to have to learn from the people in the Sanctuary who had actual experience of traversing those parts of the Chained Isles.

And then, there was also Cassie… she could help him even more.

With a dark grimace, Sunny washed the plates, spent a few moments admiring their design and craftsmanship, then went about preparing himself for a long stay in the Dream Realm.

Soon, he entered the basement, activated the maximum level of security measures, and climbed into the steel coffin of the sleeping pod.

As the lid of the sarcophagus closed, he sighed and thought:

'One week… I bet everyone will forget all about this Mongrel idiocy in a week…'

His gloomy shadow dejectedly shook its head.

***

It took Sunny a whole day to talk to everyone he needed to talk to and gather enough information about the Shipwreck Island and the routes he could take to reach it.

As it turned out, the journey promised to be even more perilous than he had expected. Awakened did not usually go that far into the wilderness of the Chained Isles alone, and even established cohorts were reluctant to venture this close to the Tear.

The Nightmare Creatures out there were ferocious and powerful, and the islands themselves presented more danger than here on the edges of the region.

...Those people did not have his Aspect, though. Sunny did not consider himself to be more powerful than a full cohort of experienced Awakened would be, but his powers were tailored perfectly for scouting, traversal, and escape. Even if he was going to find himself facing against an overwhelming foe, he was reasonably certain of his ability to at least run away.

Plus, he had Saint. The taciturn demon was worth half a cohort alone and by herself.

As the sun was crawling down from the heights of the Sky Above, he found himself in his room, studying the makeshift map of the Chained Isles. On it, Sunny had marked the potential routes to the Shipwreck Isles, as well as known dangers he would face on the way.

Of course, such a map was not completely reliable. Nightmare Creatures tended to migrate and travel between islands to escape the Crushing… but the really terrifying ones tended to stay put.

Even taking into account that some of the places he wanted to go through could turn out to be inaccessible due to entering the ascent phase, Sunny was more or less sure that he could reach the Shipwreck Island in three to four days while remaining comparatively safe.

…With one exception.

No matter how he looked at it, he was going to have to traverse an island known among the inhabitants of the Sanctuary as the Reckoning.

Not much was known about that place except for the fact that several cohorts lost members there, while others had not come back at all. Apparently, the creature that inhabited the island was especially twisted and deadly, and was capable of messing with a person's sight.

No one really knew what it was, however. All that Sunny was able to find out was that the creature was most likely not Corrupted. People were under the impression that it was of the Fallen rank, but had different opinions on what its Class was, exactly. It didn't seem to be a Tyrant, at least.

'I can fight perfectly well even if it plays tricks with my sight. And it's not like I have to defeat it… or even fight it, really. I can just slip past and be on my way…'

With a sigh, he rolled the map up and placed it in his pack. There was already a bit of food and a few supplies for a prolonged journey there. Sunny couldn't take too much with him, since there was a rather small limit on the weight of things he could pull with himself into the shadows.

He could also only do so with inanimate objects… at least for now. He had no idea if that was going to change in the future.

Finally, he opened his chest and took out the fang he had retrieved from the dead Chain Worm on the Iron Hand Island.

Sunny stared at the fang for a long time, a dark expression on his face.

Cassie was going to visit the Sanctuary soon… with this thing and her affinity to revelations, Sunny could make his expedition much safer, not to mention increase his chances of actually discovering the treasure.

…Or he could avoid having to ask her for help and take much more risk, with no guarantee of success.

After a while, Sunny threw the fang back into the chest and closed the lid.

'I'd rather die, honestly.'

With a grim smile, he locked the chest, picked up his pack, and headed to the exit.

As the sun rolled into the dark embrace of the Sky Below and disappeared, he left the safety of the Sanctuary behind, approached the edge of the island, and jumped toward one of the heavenly chains.

Chapter-410: Reckoning

Sunny traveled northwest, trying to cover as much distance during the night as he could. He rushed across gargantuan chains as a swift shadow, soared up onto the island, traversed them on foot, and dove into the darkness once he reached the other side.

He was moving across the Chained Isles with enviable speed… but still not as fast as someone capable of flight would. Using Shadow Step expended up a lot of shadow essence, so he had to replenish it often to continue riding the heavenly chains.

That, however, put him in a lot of danger. The islands were teeming with Nightmare Creatures of all kinds, as well as deadly natural… well, unnatural, really… threats. Sunny had to remain cautious at all times, keeping one shadow wrapped around his body while the other scouted ahead.

He hid in the shadows to avoid fighting with wandering abominations or, if there was no other choice, teleported away. These jumps, however, only served to devour more of his essence, forcing him to rest and circulate it through the coils of the Soul Serpent as he waited for his cores to fill up.

Most of the time, he didn't feel like there was a real threat to his life. Sunny's combination of Attributes and Abilities made him a very hard prey to hunt. No matter what kind of a horror tried, he always managed to slip away — for now, at least.

As long as he did not venture into the territory of the really terrifying Nightmare Creatures, like those Corrupted fiends that claimed some of the islands or the beings that dwelled on the dark side of them, he was going to be alright for as long as he managed his essence carefully. Against those powerful abominations, though, even being a shadow was not a guarantee of safety.

He still remembered the two ghostly torches in the dungeon beneath the ruined cathedral in the Dark City...

On his way, Sunny visited many islands that he had already explored before, and some that he never had a reason to visit. Each was lethal in its own way, and hid alluring mysteries… most of which were bound to turn out to be nothing but inescapable traps, of course. He suppressed his curiosity and moved past.

With two skies full of bright stars, the Chained Isles were stunning at night. Even while rushing forward and hiding from the abominations populating this breathtaking and terrible land, Sunny couldn't help but marvel at its dark beauty.

But beautiful things… beautiful things were the most dangerous. By now, he had learned that lesson all too well.

At dawn, Sunny finally reached the island that was supposed to be the first stop on his journey. It was a desolate place where nothing lived, with rocky ground and plenty of small impact craters that had been left behind by the debris on the neighboring island.

The chains holding that island in place had broken once, a long time ago. As the result, not restrained by anything, it soared high into the sky and eventually fell apart, ripped to pieces by the Crushing.

Its remaining neighbor was not of any particular interest to Sunny, but it was a good place to rest and catch his breath.

Hiding in one of the craters, Sunny ate a miserly breakfast and drank from the Endless Spring. Then, he looked at the rising sun, studied his map for a few minutes, and summoned Saint.

As the taciturn demon stepped out of his shadow — at enough of a distance to not subject him to the soul-eroding effect of the Broken Oath, of course — Sunny glanced at her, tiredly rubbed his face, and said:

"I am going to sleep. You stand watch, please."

The Shadow stared at him indifferently for a second, then nocked an arrow on the string of her bow and turned away.

Sunny sighed.

He could do without sleep for a couple more days, but it was wise to keep himself in the best possible shape. One never knew what could happen in the Dream Realm, after all.

Using his pack as a pillow, Sunny lay down and close his eyes.

'Just a few hours…'

***

A day later, he reached the Reckoning.

The ominous island that so many people in the Sanctuary dreaded was large, spanning no less than a dozen kilometers across. What's worse, it was supported by only two chains, which were situated almost exactly opposite of each other. To get to the next one, Sunny had no choice but to travel the whole length of the island.

There was grass covering the ground, with a forest of tall evergreen trees visible in the distance. He could see a rocky hill far away, with a waterfall rushing from a weathered cliff. Just like everywhere on the Chained Isles, it was unclear where the water came from and where it went. Sunny was already too used to the strangeness of this land to pay it any attention.

The Reckoning seemed like a beautiful and tranquil place. Idyllic, even.

However, looking at it through the eyes of the shadow, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep sense of unease. Something… something was very wrong with this place.

It was very picturesque, however, he couldn't see or hear any living beings on the island. There was no sound other than the rustle of the wind, no movement other than the slow swaying of the trees. There were no beasts, no insects, no… anything.

Not a single Nightmare Creature could be seen wandering the expanse of the peaceful island.

What could be so terrible that even Nightmare Creatures did not dare to come to this place? Or had they been slaughtered by the owner of the island? If so, where were the bones? Or bone dust, at least.

'...I don't like this.'

Initially, Sunny thought of traversing the Reckoning in his usual manner, on foot. But now, he changed his mind. It was better to waste an additional amount of shadow essence than to risk meeting the ruler of this ominous place face to face.

If it had a face...

With a frown, Sunny used Shadow Step to leave the heavenly chain and appear on the surface of the island, near the shadow he had sent to take a look at it. Sunny did not assume physical form, preferring to remain incorporeal.

That way, he would be able to reach the other side of the Reckoning unseen.

'Where is that terrible creature, anyway?'

He couldn't see any hint of it anywhere.

Full of grim apprehension, he slowly moved through the deep shadows that were cast by the tall trees of the evergreen forest.

No matter how hard Sunny looked, he didn't notice any movement near him.

It was as though the Fallen abomination that gave the island its name, Reckoning, had simply disappeared.

'Maybe it can't be seen…'

Sunny cut off his vision and concentrated on the Shadow Sense.

His perception of shadows came into focus, reaching far and wide.

And there…

'What was that?!'

There was one shadow in particular that didn't belong to anything, approaching him with terrible speed.

'The... the bastard is invisible!'

Sunny froze, becoming absolutely still. In this state, he was not only one of the shadows, but also indistinguishable from the larger shadow he was hiding in. He didn't possess a physical body, so nothing was supposed to be able to hurt him in that state. At least physically...

The invisible creature continued to move in his direction, even faster than before.

'Wait… no, something doesn't make sense…'

Even if the abomination was invisible, why was there no sound? Why didn't grass bend beneath its feet?

It was almost as if the Nightmare Creature that dwelt on the Reckoning was… really…

A shadow.

Before Sunny could react, the owner of the Reckoning was upon him.

And then, he learned that...

Shadows, too, could feel pain.

Chapter-411: Reflection

Sunny had never fought in his shadow form, and really, he didn't even know how. All he had were his instincts, but that wasn't enough. In fact, trusting your instincts too much was a sure way to get yourself killed.

Intelligence was the most dangerous weapon in the arsenal of a human, and it was Sunny's mind that ended up saving his life.

He had realized that his enemy was not invisible, but a shadow just like him only a moment before the creature was upon him. In that split second, Sunny managed to come up with the only way to escape death.

As sharp pain pierced his entire being, he lunged forward… and escaped the shadows, rolling away on the grass. Jumping to his feet, Sunny staggered and clutched at his side, blood flowing between his fingers.

"Argh…"

The shadow of the unknown abomination lunged in pursuit… and swiped uselessly across his body, not causing him any harm.

It was just a shadow, after all.

Throwing a glance at the thin tear in the Puppeteer's Shroud and a deep wound beneath it, Sunny took a step back. Simultaneously, he gave his shadows a command to hide themselves under his armor and augment his body.

Physical attacks couldn't harm shadows… but shadows also had no way to harm living beings. That was the thought that had saved him. If he had failed to assume the shape of a human in time, he would have been dead by now… most likely.

Because he had not, however, he and the shadow creature were now at a standstill.

The master of the Reckoning Island tried to attack him several more times, each strike ending up as fruitless as the previous ones. Then, it froze, as if slightly confused by the situation.

Sunny finally had a chance to take a good look at the hostile shadow.

It looked just like a shadow would — like a dark, ethereal silhouette of a person painted on the grass in black. The creature seemed to have two legs, two hands, and one head. If Sunny didn't know what it really was, he would have assumed that the shadow was cast by an ordinary person.

There was no one else in sight, though.

Backing away and grimacing because of the pain radiating from the deep wound in his side, Sunny stared at the enemy and thought feverishly:

'No, this is wrong…'

A shadow creature was, indeed, deadly for someone like him.

But to every other human on the Chained Isles, it was completely harmless.

How was it, then, that so many people had been killed by it? And what about the Nightmare Creatures? How had this shadow slaughtered so many living beings?

His eyes widened slightly.

Sunny threw his hand to the side to summon the Midnight Shard… and just in time.

What happened next caused him to shudder.

The creature moved once again, and then, two dark flames appeared in its darkness. A moment later, a human figure stepped out of the shadow. It was a young man with pale skin and cold, cruel eyes of an

experienced killer. A spark of madness burned in their depths.

The stranger had black hair and was wearing a light armor made out of soft silk and black, lustreless leather. In his hands, the apparition was holding a long, slightly curved blade of an austere tachi.

Sunny felt fear grip his heart as he recognized the face in front of him.

Of course, he did. It was his own face, after all.

Looking at the devil of Reckoning was like looking into a mirror.

'That's, uh… since when was I so scary?!'

Sunny recoiled in shock.

"What the hell are you?"

The apparition mimicked his expression, then opened its mouth. Its lips moved, however, there was no sound, as if the abomination was mute.

Sunny had no problem reading its lips, though.

"...What the hell are you?"

'What is going on...'

Before he could finish that thought, though, he had to defend himself against a lightning-fast strike of the enemy's sword.

Sunny deflected the fearsome attack and staggered back, his hands trembling from the force of the impact.

'Curses…'

The bastard might have looked like Sunny, but it was much, much stronger. About as strong as a Fallen Devil would probably be…

Sunny had no time to recover before his evil twin was upon him once again, attacking with the painfully familiar grace of his own battle style. This time, the tip of the tachi missed Sunny's eyes only by a few

centimeters.

A vicious smile appeared on the apparition's face.

Sunny grunted.

As the abomination launched a flurry of lethal attacks his way, each swift and vicious, he struggled to defend himself and fought through the pain. He was barely holding on… for now, at least. Because of how strong and fast the creature was, Sunny had no doubt that he'd be killed eventually.

How could he fight against someone who knew all his tricks, but was also much more powerful? Even the Shadow Dance was useless... what was the point in trying to mirror the style of an opponent who had stolen his technique from Sunny himself?!

The situation did not look good, at all. Especially because blood was still streaming down Sunny's torso.

Between two strikes, he dashed back and pierced the apparition with a furious gaze.

"You... poor bastard... of all the faces out there, you just had to choose mine? Fool, couldn't you have chosen someone, I don't know… taller?!"

Internally, though, he couldn't help but think:

'Not gonna lie, the evil version of me looks sort of… awesome. Am I really this dashing in real life?'

Sunny didn't really know how to feel about this.

...He wasn't, of course, trying to speak to the creature because he wanted to chat.

He was just trying to distract it while Saint was drawing her bow.

A moment later, a black arrow whistled in the air, aimed at the devil's heart.

…However, the young man with cruel dark eyes simply stepped to the side and swiped the arrow away with his sword.

Sunny cursed.

…He became really despondent, though, only a moment later, when a sudden ripple spread through the bizarre creature's body.

In a blink of an eye, the apparition changed. Its face suddenly became white as alabaster and inhumanly beautiful, with ruby eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips. The soft fabric of its armor turned black as onyx and hard as stone. The shape and height of its body changed, too.

Before Sunny could even react, he wasn't facing his own reflection anymore.

Instead, he was facing Saint's.

'Crap…'

As the sickening feeling of his soul slowly falling apart permeated Sunny's entire being, the perfect copy of the taciturn demon raised its bow and sent an arrow flying straight at his heart.

Chapter-412: Perfect Adversary

'Well… one mystery is solved, at least.'

Sunny became painfully aware of how the devil of the Reckoning was able to slaughter so many Awakened, and why no Nightmare Creature could survive on its island.

If the bastard was able to turn into a copy of any enemy while remaining as powerful as a Fallen Devil, then very few things could ever hope to escape from it alive.

And those Awakened who had escaped despite everything mistakenly believed that their companions fell to a creature that could mess with people's sight… what else would they think after watching a human being killed by what looked like their exact copy?

Well… why had no one thought that it was an actual copy and not a trick on the eye, damn it?!

If there was one thing that landed Sunny in this dire situation, it was that people in the Sanctuary severely lacked imagination!

…All these thoughts flashed through his mind as he used Shadow Step to disappear and fall awkwardly to the ground a dozen meters behind the devil, completely out of the way of the flying arrow.

'Great… but now what?'

Just a few moments before, Sunny had been contemplating abandoning the fight and simply running away. Unlike some humans he had met in the past, he wasn't burdened by useless things like pride or vanity. If the situation called for a cowardly escape, he was ready and willing to do just that.

But now that the bastard had turned into Saint and was holding a

bow, the idea of trying to run was not very enticing. The last thing he wanted was to be hit in the back of his head by an arrow.

'Think, think…'

There was no time to think, though.

The reflection of Saint swiftly spun and lunged toward him. As Sunny teleported further away, the creature suddenly pivoted and crashed into the trunk of a tall, ancient tree.

A moment later, Sunny emerged from the shadows and saw, with horror, a giant mass of heavy wood plummeting on him from above.

Desperately burning through his essence, he filled his body with as much strength as possible and raised his hands, trying to catch the falling tree. As a groan escaped from his mouth, Sunny's feet dug into the soft soil of the Reckoning Island. Somehow, he managed to stop the tree without being crushed by it.

It was at this moment that a second arrow flashed toward his heart…

Only to collide with another one in the air and fly aside.

Some distance away, the real Saint dismissed the bow, raised her sword, and dashed toward the impostor.

'Eat that, bastard!'

Sunny gritted his teeth, strained his already overtaxed muscles, and threw the massive tree at the abomination with a tremendously powerful push. When he used his essence and augmented his body with both shadows, Sunny was able to achieve bursts of truly inhuman strength.

How was the bastard going to escape this?

The creature indifferently lowered its shoulder, then simply disappeared into the shadows and appeared on the other side of the flying trunk. Then, it met attacking Saint with a devastating shoulder bash.

The onyx armor of the taciturn demon cracked, and she was thrown back, causing another tree to explode into a cloud of splinters.

Sunny paled.

'S—shadow Step. Not good…'

The apparition turned to him and mockingly tilted its head.

Something… something was very wrong with that thing. It seemed maleficent and utterly mad, but at the same time… incomplete, somehow. Behind the evil will and terrifying killing intent that dwelled in its ruby eyes, there was a hint of some other, boundless emotion.

Sunny faintly recognized the feeling of it, since he had felt the same deep and indescribable emotion one time before.

Far below the Hollow Mountains, in the darkness of the misty stone labyrinth between two otherworldly rivers, he had sensed the same feeling of loss, anguish, and confusion in the shadows left behind by the companions of the First Lord of the Bright Castle.

'...What even is that thing?'

He had no time to ponder about its nature, though, because the creature had once again turned into a pale young man with dark eyes and was lunging at him, a vicious smile frozen on its lips.

Feeling a cold shiver running down his spine, Sunny realized that he would not win this fight. Nor was he capable of escaping from the Reckoning alive.

This time, he was truly in danger.

He was really going to die on this beautiful, peaceful island… and the last thing he was going to see before falling into the embrace of death would be his own reflection staring back at him through the eyes of his killer.

Unless…

Sunny sent Saint back into the Soul Sea and met the apparition's attack with a block, feeling his body shudder from the force of the blow.

He had assumed that the Devil of Reckoning was a shadow, and it was indeed similar to one… but, really, it was not. It only appeared as a shadow because Sunny himself had been in the form of a shadow when they first clashed. And once he had turned into a human, the devil, too, became a human.

The young man with the cold eyes of a killer took a small step and made a high thrust with the tachi. Sunny, however, knew his own fighting style too well to be caught by that trap. Knowing that the thrust was just a feint, he threw his own blade downward, and just barely managed to deflect a vicious slash that followed.

He was late by a fraction of a second, though… another tear appeared in the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and a shallow wound on his thigh began sipping with blood.

The creature was more of a reflection than a shadow. It mirrored everything about its enemy. Their appearance, their weapons, their battle technique. Even their powers… otherwise, how would it be able to use Shadow Step? In a sense, it was a perfect adversary. But that wasn't all…

Sunny grimaced as the apparition threw his sword away and delivered a powerful kick that almost turned all of his ribs into bone dust. If not for the burst of essence he had sent to his legs, Sunny would have never managed to dodge that devastating blow.

But his essence was already running dry, and his enemy seemed to be even stronger now… as if the more Sunny bled, the more powerful the pale young man became.

The devil was even able to mirror the Memories its enemy wielded. Before, Sunny had experienced the soul attack of the copy of the Broken Oath. And now, the creature was obviously being fed raw power by the Blood Blossom…

He attacked with the Midnight Shard to buy himself a couple of

moments to think…

The apparition had not seemed to be affected by the Broken Oath, though. Was that because it had assumed the form of Saint, who was immune to soul attacks? Did this mean that the devil was able to copy not only powers and Memories, but Attributes, too?

The creature easily deflected Sunny's attack and leaned forward to deliver the final blow. Sunny's only hope to escape it was to jump back…

But what else did the creature copy? Was it really a perfect reflection?

There was only one way to find out.

Instead of jumping back, Sunny stepped forward and collided against the apparition, completely open, unable to escape being struck down by the enemy's blade.

Before the deadly strike came, however, he leaned close to the devil's ear and whispered, so softly that no one except for the two of them would ever be able to hear what he had said:

"Lost from Light, stop."

And then, the devil froze, as if suddenly turned to stone.

Sunny smiled.

…It was a perfect reflection, indeed.

Chapter-413: Mirror Beast

The apparition stood motionlessly, frozen in place by Sunny's quiet command. He could see his face reflecting in its dark eyes, even paler than usual, beads of sweat glistening in the sun. The creature was completely still, all its terrifying strength shackled by the four simple words Sunny had whispered to it.

It was... enslaved. No matter how powerful the strange abomination was, no amount of power could ever allow it to disobey the command of its new master.

...Sunny.

By stealing his face and his powers, the creature had also inherited his Innate Ability, Shadow Bond. Sunny had made use of that bond to subjugate the devil, and now, it was at his mercy.

For now, at least.

With a pained grimace, Sunny fell to the ground and drew in a hoarse breath.

'That… that was close.'

The wound on his thigh was not too serious, but the cut he had received as a shadow was long and deep. Blood Weave had prevented him from losing too much blood and was going to ensure a fast recovery, but it had its limits. The wounds needed to be tended to… however, they could wait.

Right now, Sunny had to decide what to do with the former ruler of the Reckoning... the dreadful creature that had slain plenty of humans, and only gods knew how many Nightmare Creatures, which was now under his full control.

Such a powerful abomination… it would surely be very helpful to have something that fearsome serving him, unable to disobey any command.

He glanced at the frozen creature and shivered.

Looking at it was still like looking in a mirror, after all. Despite knowing that the thing in front of him was a Nightmare Creature, he couldn't help but see a slight young man with pale skin and dark eyes… couldn't help but see himself.

Yes, having a Fallen Devil do his bidding would be extremely beneficial, especially because the apparition looked exactly like him. With a bit of cunning and preparation, Sunny would be able to seemingly appear in two places at the same time.

If he ever needed to prove that he wasn't Mongrel or accomplish something shady without drawing any suspicion, that would be a perfect way to do so… there were countless scenarios where such an ability would be incredibly useful.

But there lay the problem.

The creature was only enslaved because it had assumed his form. Since the creature could take any shape, it was going to stop possessing his Aspect Abilities — including Shadow Bond — as soon as it turned into something else. Then, it would be free of its shackles and able to do whatever it wanted, including unleashing its wrath on Sunny.

That was why he had dismissed Saint before attempting to subjugate the apparition. He needed it to remain as his own reflection, and no one else's.

Yes, he could circumvent the possibility of losing control over the terrifying creature with a long series of complex orders that would limit when and how it could use its shapeshifting. But coming up with a foolproof net of prohibitions was a herculean task… Sunny wasn't even sure that it was possible.

He had spent a long time thinking of ways to escape this exact fate,

so he knew better than most — better than anyone, perhaps — how hard it was to keep an unwilling slave under control. Especially if the enslaved being was more powerful than its master.

There would always be a way to twist words, find a loophole, and turn the orders given by the master against themselves. Sunny was sure of it.

He had to be.

So... what was he supposed to do with the frozen abomination?

Standing up with a grimace, Sunny faced his perfect copy and looked at it with regret.

The main reason for what he was about to do, nevertheless, was way less complicated. He simply didn't want to be a slaver. He didn't want to own any living thing.

Sunny lingered for a while, and then said:

"Don't be scared. I won't make you a slave. That would be too cruel of a fate, don't you think? Even… even for a Nightmare Creature like you… "

With that, he raised his hand, as if to caress the cheek of the pale young man, and then swiped it swiftly across his neck.

Almost invisible in the bright light, the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard trembled as drops of crimson blood fell from it into the vibrant grass.

The young man didn't move, but his pupils widened. A few moments later, blood flowed from between his lips, painting his pale skin red.

Sunny looked at the dying apparition, deeply disturbed by the visage in front of him.

…It was not every day that one got to see himself die.

'That's... that is...'

He paled slightly, but did not look away.

In front of him, a person who looked exactly like himself was slowly drowning in blood, a crimson torrent flowing from his cut throat.

A few moments later, when the creature was on the death's doorstep, its body suddenly trembled, and then shifted slightly. A tortured smile appeared on its face.

The apparition's lips moved, but just as before, no sound escaped from them. However, Sunny thought that he had managed to read a few words:

"…we… never… searching."

That was what the apparition had tried to say.

Then, the light in its eyes extinguished. A strange ripple spread over the young man's body, and a moment later, thin cracks appeared on his skin.

After a second or two, the creature shattered into a rain of silver glass, which then turned into a stream of light and disappeared.

Only one jagged mirror shard remained laying in the grass, reflecting nothing but cold darkness.

As Sunny stared at all this in bewilderment, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an Ascended Reflection, Mirror Beast.]

Sunny blinked.

'Wait… what did it just say?'

The Spell, however, wasn't done speaking.

[...You have received a Memory.]

Chapter-414: Mystery of the Dark Mirror

Sunny stared at the ground, confused.

'What just happened?'

Why did the Spell call that thing an Ascended Reflection? What was a Reflection? And why was it Ascended instead of Fallen?

How could a Nightmare Creature be Ascended?

He frowned.

'...Was it not a Nightmare Creature? How is that possible?'

The apparition was definitely not a human, so what else could it be if not one of the Dream Realm's abominations?

And one more thing…

The Spell did not say that his shadow had grown stronger, did it?

To make sure, Sunny checked the number of his shadow fragments. Just as he had suspected, it didn't change. He even dove into the Soul Sea, and saw that there was no new shadow among the rows of the creatures he had slain.

'This is very, very strange.'

What the hell had he just killed?

With a deep frown on his face, Sunny bent down and cautiously picked up the jagged mirror shard that the apparition had left behind. No matter how he looked at it, the shard resembled a perfectly mundane piece of glass, with a thin layer of silver painted over its

reverse side.

The only strange thing about it was that no matter how Sunny turned the shard, it refused to reflect anything except for an impenetrable veil of darkness.

There was also an inscription on its reverse.

Sunny's frown deepened when he realized that the inscription was not made with runes… instead, what he saw were the familiar letters of the human alphabet. They were clumsy and awkward, as if written by a child's hand.

There was only one word written on the mirror shard:

"Beastie"

'...What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

The mystery of the Mirror Beast was so strange that for a time, Sunny even forgot about the burning pain in his side.

Eventually, he whispered:

"...An Echo?"

Echoes did not possess souls, so he expected that slaying one would not reward him with any shadow fragments, just like what had happened after Mirror Beast's death.

The apparition, however, was obviously not an Echo. It was too independent, sentient, and had too much... individuality to be a simple copy of a dead Nightmare Creature. Not to mention that it had been ruling the Reckoning for the past few years, with no human master in sight.

There was, however, a type of being that it resembled.

Sunny threw a dark look at the remains of a tree that had been shattered by Saint's body.

…In many ways, the strange Reflection resembled a Shadow.

Was the Mirror Beast a type of Echo created by someone's Aspect? Its creator must have been incredibly powerful, then. If so, where were they? What had happened to them, and why was their Reflection wandering the Chained Isles in a feral state?

There were no answers.

It was just a theory, anyway. Sunny had no proof whatsoever to substantiate it.

Maybe his new Memory would give him some answers…

He was about to summon the runes, but a sudden pulse of pain reminded him that he was, in fact, still wounded. With a hiss, Sunny clutched at his side and looked around, searching for shelter.

He was going to have to tend to his wounds... and rest after the fight with Mirror Beast. The Memory could wait until after he wasn't bleeding so much…

Wrapping the strange mirror shard in a piece of fabric and placing it into his pack, Sunny used some of his last remaining reserve of shadow essence to step through the shadows and appear near the rocky hill in the center of the island. His shadow had noticed a shallow cave there, which was situated — obviously — behind the foaming wall of the picturesque waterfall.

Walking on a narrow stone ledge that led behind the waterfall, Sunny checked that the cave was empty, and then entered its cool shade.

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The cave wasn't very big, but due to its location and hidden nature, there was no better shelter on the entire island. Rather happy with this discovery, Sunny groaned and lowered himself to the ground.

Sending Saint to keep watch outside, he dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud, then opened his pack and took out a small box containing several thin needles and a span of silk thread.

Staring at the needles with a deadpan expression, Sunny sighed.

'I hate this part.'

Due to his Awakened body and the nature of Blood Weave, Sunny could recover from most injuries much faster than any mundane human, or even one of his peers, would be able to. However, if he wanted to be able to travel again by tomorrow, he still had to take measures.

With another sigh, he threaded one of the needles, gritted his teeth, and began suturing the edges of the long cut on his side together. The process was not very pleasant, to say the least, so the cave was full of the sounds of heavy breathing and suppressed curses for a while.

Finally, Sunny was done. Washing the dried blood off his body with the help of the Endless Spring, he grimaced and looked around.

Now that he had time to take a better look at the cave, he noticed that it had, apparently, been used as shelter by another human at some point in the past. There was a circle of stones built to contain a fire, with a bunch of firewood arranged neatly by its side. By now, the wood had long rotted, letting Sunny know that the cave remained empty for many years.

There was a pack much like his own laying on the cold stones near the firepit. He limped toward it and took a look inside.

There was nothing of particular interest there — just the usual supplies a traveling Awakened would take with them on a long expedition, most of them ruined by the humidity inside the cave and the passage of time. He did, however, retrieve a rolled-up map and studied it for some time.

The map had been drawn on a piece of monster hide, so the humid air did it no favors. Most of it was unreadable, with only a few small pieces remaining intact. Sunny judged that the person who had left it behind was much more knowledgeable about the Chained Isles than he was… sadly, none of that knowledge had been preserved.

The only legible word he could easily read was written near the edge of the Tear. It read:

"...Hope?"

Sunny sighed.

The stranger whose map he was studying had most likely been killed by the Mirror Beast. For a moment, he entertained the idea that the map had actually been left behind by the creator of the strange Reflection, but that theory made little sense. Why would such a powerful person leave not only his things, but also his creation behind?

Putting the map back into the rotted pack, Sunny glanced at the firepit and said after a long pause:

"I'm sorry that your hopes had been for naught… whoever you were. Now, your nightmare is over."

With that, he hesitated for a few moments, and then finally summoned the runes.

It was time to take a look at the Memory he had received for slaying the terrifying creature that the Spell had called the Mirror Beast.

A few seconds later, Sunny's eyes widened.

'Weapon! It is a weapon…'

Chapter-415: Cruel Sight

Sunny stared at the shimmering runes, excitement rising in his heart.

This was what he had been waiting for…

Memory: [Cruel Sight].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Weapon.

'A weapon…'

Sunny had been searching for a new weapon for a long time. He was very fond of the Midnight Shard, since that was the sword he had carried through the darkest time of his life, and which which he had fought his way out of the hell of the Forgotten Shore. It was a very powerful Memory, too, one whose enchantment had saved his life on several occasions.

However, Sunny felt that he had outgrown the austere tachi. Or rather, the obstacles he was facing these days had.

Many of the Nightmare Creatures on the Chaines Isles were of the Fallen rank, and their tough hides presented a lot of resistance to the sharp blade of the Awakened sword. Not to mention those Corrupted horrors that Sunny avoided to the best of his ability, for now, but was inevitably bound to encounter one day.

The other reason he wanted to procure a new weapon was the fact that the [Unbroken] enchantment, while extremely potent and useful, could only be accessed in very rare circumstances… namely, when Sunny was nearing death. This meant that the most powerful trait of

the Midnight Shard could only help Sunny if he made a terrible mistake.

If Sunny fought with skill and foresight, however — thus keeping himself from being mortally wounded — the powerful enchantment remained inactive, as it had for the past months. Paradoxically, the better Sunny performed, the less useful the Midnight Shard was to him.

It was nice to have a last resort, but Sunny did not like the idea of relying on a tool that could only be effective if he failed. He wanted to possess a weapon whose enchantments were reliant on his success, and as such, both strengthened him and rewarded him for doing well.

Hopefully, this was one such weapon. It was an Ascended Memory of the fourth tier — equivalent to a Memory he would have received from a Fallen Devil. That was already a tremendous start…

His most powerful weapon right now, the Moonlight Shard, had come from a mere Fallen Beast.

Trying to control his expectations, Sunny trembled in anticipation and read further:

Memory Description: [...Full of pride, the noble knight made a deal with the Dreamspawn. Years later, the knight had defeated all his enemies and became a mighty king. On the day that his son uttered the first word, the Dreamspawn came to the king and demanded his pay. He left the kingdom with the child and disappeared, never to be seen again.

Much later, the young prince returned and stood beneath his father's throne. He expected to be met with joy and warmth, but was met with fear and suspicion instead.]

Sunny frowned.

'Huh… what the hell does that mean?'

The description mentioned a Dreamspawn… or rather, the Dreamspawn. That was the name of an Attribute Nephis had, which she possessed because of being born from a Hollow mother. Were

there other people with the same Attribute among the human race? There had to be… and, judging by this strange tale, they had been feared even here, in the Dream Realm?

No, that didn't make any sense. Nephis was described as being born of two worlds, so how could a native of the Dream Realm possess the same Attribute?

'Very strange… maybe the name is just a coincidence…'

Sunny shrugged, then concentrated on the runes.

'Tell me what you can do…'

Memory Enchantments: [Shapeshifter], [Light Eater], [Ghost Blade], [Dark Mirror].

'Four of them!'

His eyes gleamed.

[Shapeshifter] Enchantment Description: "This weapon can shift form between a sword and a spear."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then turned away from the runes and summoned the Cruel Sight. He just had to see this…

A tenebrous mist shrouded his hand, and then, an elegant sword appeared in it. It was much shorter than the Midnight Shard, with a leaf-shaped blade that was about as long as the distance between Sunny's elbow and the tip of his middle finger. The blade seemed to be forged out of polished silver, and served as a perfectly clear mirror.

Looking into it, Sunny could see the reflection of his pale face and the wall of the cave behind him.

The hilt of the short sword was made out of polished black wood, which was encased in intricately engraved silver near the guard and at the pommel.

The Cruel Sight was light and swift. Sunny slashed the air several

times and smiled. It was going to take some time to get used to using a single-handed sword, but he liked it. It already felt like an extension of his hand. It was much more suited for stealth attacks, too.

The sword was also double-edged, which gave him more freedom in how to use it.

But that wasn't all…

Following a mental command, the hilt of the sword suddenly began to extend. A second later, Sunny was holding a long, graceful spear. The black shaft contrasted against the silver blade, creating a beautiful and somber image. The blade itself kept its length, so Sunny could perform not only thrusting attacks, but also cuts and slashes.

He stared at the somber, elegant spear for a bit, then commanded it to turn back into the sword.

This was going to be a challenge. Sunny wasn't really proficient with polearms, but he had seen how versatile, unpredictable, and deadly they could be in the hands of a master.

Not to mention that he had wished to have more distance between himself and the Nightmare Creatures he fought on numerous occasions… this weapon was a perfect combination of mobility and reach, allowing him to effortlessly switch between a nimble shortsword and a devastating long spear.

It gave him access to the best of both worlds.

His smile widened.

"Perfect… this is perfect!"

What else could it do?

There were three Enchantments left:

[Light Eater] Enchantment Description: "The blade of this weapon can reflect, absorb, and expel light."

That would be useful to control shadows, as well as potentially blinding the opponents...

[Ghost Blade] Enchantment Description: "This weapon can strike at incorporeal targets."

An incredible ability that would give Sunny the ability to fight against some of the most dangerous creatures in the Dream Realm, those wraiths that were immune to physical damage.

[Dark Mirror] Enchantment Description: "Each attack of this weapon can be augmented with elemental damage. It can be charged with any element the wielder has been damaged by."

"Current Charge: None."

Sunny gasped.

'A permanent elemental augmentation. This… is… incredible!'

Chapter-416: Hanged Man

Sunny stared at the emptiness for some time, thinking.

His new weapon was an Ascended one of the fourth rank, which already made it much more formidable than anything else in his arsenal. It was adamantine and sharp as a razor, which would allow him to cut through Fallen creatures as if they were made of butter… well, not exactly, but rather close.

Added to that were the considerable reach of its spear form and the incredible swiftness of its sword form.

But there was more.

The Cruel Sight was capable of augmenting its attacks with elemental damage. That meant that each wound Sunny would deliver to his enemies would be more dire… not only that, but the nature of the augmentation could be changed, which meant that if given enough time to prepare, he would be able to exploit the weaknesses of his opponents with the element they were most vulnerable to.

He just had to get himself wounded by that same element.

'Ouch...'

Everything that was worth it had to hurt a little. Sunny had learned it many years ago.

Speaking of which.

He sighed, then summoned the Cruel Sight and held it in his hands for a bit. Then, he stood up and walked toward the exit from the cave.

As the sound of the waterfall grew louder and louder, he prepared

himself.

…A second later, Sunny entered the field of soul erosion emanated from Saint's armor. Instantly, he felt weak and in pain, as though the very essence of his self was being dissolved by a terrible force.

'Argh… curses!'

No matter how many times he was subjected to the effect of the Broken Oath, it was a vile feeling every time. The only good thing about it was that souls, just like bodies, could heal with time. And as long as he did not spend too much time being damaged by the evil Memory, he would be able to recover in a day or two.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny summoned the runes describing the Cruel Sight and simultaneously sent essence into its silver blade, activating the [Dark Mirror] enchantment.

As his contorted face reflected in the polished silver of the elegant sword, nothing about it changed. However, the Cruel Sight suddenly seemed… different. As if an invisible, cold, and sharp aura surrounded its edges.

Sunny looked at the description of the [Dark Mirror]:

"Current Charge: Soul."

With a relieved sigh, he took a few steps back and escaped the radius of the Broken Oath. The sensation of his soul being slowly destroyed swiftly disappeared.

The runes, however, did not change.

Sunny had to feed the Memory with a small amount of shadow essence to activate the augmenting enchantment, but its blade would remain entwined with the element of his choice until he charged it with another.

A cruel smile appeared on his lips.

…Just like that, Sunny now possessed a weapon capable of dealing soul damage — the rarest and most insidious type of damage he

knew of, one that very few beings out there had any resistance to.

In a span of one day, his lethality had grown manyfold.

Dismissing the somber sword, Sunny turned around and walked back into the cave.

"I guess I am the true harbinger of reckoning now…"

His gloomy shadow lingered for a bit, then scratched the back of its head.

For once, it had nothing to add.

***

Two days later, Sunny was finally approaching Shipwreck Island. Currently, he was on the neighboring one, hiding in the shadow of a collapsed stone tower that had long ago become overgrown with moss. Somewhere behind him, the body of a giant worm-like creature lay on the ground, its body seeping with foul black blood.

Sunny had spent a lot of essence jumping through shadows to avoid being devoured by that thing. No matter how many times he had pierced its flesh with his spear, the worm seemed to possess an almost endless amount of vitality. The fact that Sunny had no idea where any of the abomination's vital organs were only made the situation worse.

In the end, however, the Nightmare Creature had succumbed to the damage being continuously dealt to its soul. And now, it was dead.

…Swarms of smaller, but no less repulsive worms were already emerging from the ground to feast on its flesh. Sunny did not care — he had already retrieved the soul shard from the creature's body, and he surely had no plans of using the worm's meat as food.

And regardless, his attention was currently concentrated elsewhere.

'What… the hell…'

The Shipwreck Island was currently at the height of its ascent phase,

and loomed high above in the sky. As the result, Sunny was able to see its underbelly, far away in the distance.

The downside of the island was shrouded in eternal shadow, and something vast and terrifying was moving in it. The inhabitants of the Dark Side were all powerful and unsightly, but the thing nesting under that one, in particular, was especially harrowing. Perhaps all islands this close to the Tear sheltered such horrors…

But even that was not the thing Sunny was looking at.

'I guess… I have my answer…'

A long time ago, one of the chains connected to Shipwreck Island had broken, and now hung down. Entangled in it, a giant iron corpse swayed slowly in the wind.

The creature resembled a man made entirely out of metal. The heavenly chain had coiled around one of his legs, so the giant hung with his head down, his face rusted and severely damaged. His powerful chest was caved in and shattered by some titanic blow, and one of his arms was torn away at the shoulder.

This was, without a doubt, the creature whose lost limb gave the name to the Iron Hand Island.

The dead giant swayed despondently in the wind, producing sounds of rusty metal scraping against the iron of the heavenly chain. Those sounds were loud enough to reach across the gap between two islands and be heard by Sunny in his hiding place.

Looking at that humbling sight, Sunny shivered.

'Who could have killed such a thing?'

Of course, there was no way to know. Just like always, finding one answer had immediately presented Sunny with a dozen new questions.

Nervously shifting his gaze between the hanged giant and the swarm of worms ravenously devouring their elder, Sunny remained hidden in the shadows and waited.

Soon, the rattling of chains announced that the Shipwreck Island was starting to descend.

Sunny tensed.

'It's time...'

Chapter-417: Shipwreck

The chain leading to the Shipwreck Island was about four kilometers long, which was on the shorter side by the Chained Isles standards. As a swift shadow, Sunny would have been able to ride it all the way to his destination in just a few minutes. Sadly, the heavenly chain was currently drawn taut and nowhere near the Sky Below, which meant that its links weren't covered by a thick layer of shadows.

He was going to have to cross it on foot.

As the ground behind him started to move, announcing the approach of something far more hungry and terrifying than the swarm of gluttonous maggots, Sunny slid out of his hiding spot, dashed toward the edge of the island, and jumped down.

Falling through the vast expanse of the blue sky, he landed on the iron surface of the heavenly chain, rolled down a few meters, and then finally caught his balance.

The chain stretched far into the distance, rising higher and higher until it connected with the slowly descending Shipwreck Island. Unlike how it was with the other pieces of land Sunny had seen in this strange region of the Dream Realm, the chain didn't simply disappear into the soil, but instead led to a tall stone structure that resembled a castle gate.

Two massive pillars rose high into the sky, overgrown by vines and moss.

The gate itself had been broken a long time ago, and now, the space between the pillars was empty, the wind passing freely through its vast opening.

...Further away, the corpse of the iron giant continued to sway in the air, his one remaining hand pointed at the Sky Below.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, Sunny turned it into the spear and cautiously moved forward.

The further he walked, the lower the Shipwreck Island descended, until finally the heavenly chain became almost horizontal. In about an hour, Sunny crossed the abyss separating two isles and approached the stone structure he had noticed from afar.

Up close, it was even more monumental. He found out that he had been wrong, though: the pillars did not seem like they had ever served to house a massive gate. Instead, they just reached for the sky, built for some unknown purpose. There were weathered steps cut into each of the pillars, leading all the way to the top.

Sunny frowned.

'Who would be crazy enough to climb that high?'

Even now that the island had descended, up there on top of the monumental pillars the Crushing must have been suffocating. With a shrug, he used the Dark Wing to glide upward and climbed onto a wide stone platform between the pillars.

From here, the remains of an ancient road led further into the island. Following it to reach the top of a low hill, Sunny stopped and looked down, at the sight of the peculiar landmark that gave this place its name.

At the very heart of the desolate island, a large wooden ship lay broken on the ground. It must have been beautiful and magnificent once, but now, all that remained of its former glory were the fluid lines of the graceful and narrow hull. The ancient wood somehow remained untouched by the passage of time, but the bow of the ship was completely shattered.

There were also large breaches here and there along the length of the wreck, and green vines covering large sections of it.

What was a ship doing at the heart of a land that had no rivers and no seas remained a mystery, but Sunny became hypnotized by the sight of a crushed vessel for a completely different reason.

A triumphant spark appeared in his eyes.

'I guess I am in luck today!'

With a dark smile, he shifted his gaze and looked at the tall mast of the ship.

A dead, withered tree coiled around it, its naked branches stretching into the sky like bones. Sunny recognized that tree, even if it looked very different from how it was depicted on the reverse side of the mysterious coins, full of life and in bloom.

This was the same ship he had seen before.

…Which meant that the coin might have come from inside the wreck, or at least was connected to it somehow.

Initially, Sunny had only planned to scout the vicinity of the island and search for the traces left by the dead Chain Worm. But now, he felt as if this scouting expedition could actually lead him directly to the treasure he so desperately wanted to find. What were the chances that the coins depicting the strange ship came from somewhere else?

Close to zero, most likely.

Now, he only had to sneak into the wreck, explore it, and return in one piece.

…Which was not an easy task, considering how close to the Tear the island was. Sunny could not see any Nightmare Creatures moving across its surface, but he knew that there had to be some, and that they were going to be of the truly dreadful kind.

Still, he wasn't going to turn back now.

'It's worth it…'

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Sunny spent some time observing the island. No matter how hard he looked and how much his shadows roamed around, he couldn't see any abominations anywhere near the ancient ship.

…That didn't mean there were none, though. It just meant that they were better at hiding than he was at looking.

After a while, Sunny frowned and summoned Saint. The taciturn demon stepped out of his shadow a few hundred meters down the slope of the hill and indifferently looked around. Then, she dismissed her bow, and instead summoned a melee weapon.

The Midnight Shard appeared in her hands, its austere blade reflecting the black onyx of the Shadow's armor.

…The two suited each other very well.

Saint turned her back to Sunny, raised the long tachi, and calmly headed toward the distant wreck. After thirty seconds or so, he left his shelter and followed, keeping to the shadows.

Minute after minute passed in tense silence. Despite his expectations, they didn't meet any powerful abominations. The island was quiet and deserted, covered only by overgrown ruins, vines, and piles of broken wood.

When they were halfway to the ship, however, something finally changed.

As Saint approached one of the piles of debris, it suddenly moved.

…And then assembled itself into the shape of a tall, menacing humanoid creature, its hands ending in long jagged blades.

As countless similar piles of splintered wood began to move all around them, Sunny breathed out a curse.

It had started so well!

Chapter-418: Remnant Crew

'Damnation!'

Before the first wood wraith could even fully form, Saint was already upon it. The blade of the Midnight Shard flashed through the air… and bit into the body of the creature with the dull sound of an axe striking the bark of a tree.

The effect was somewhat the same: although she managed to do some damage, the wraith simply ignored the shallow cut and lurched forward, towering above the graceful stone knight with destructive menace. Its hands fell down with crushing force, the wooden blades aimed at Saint's helmet.

…Wood couldn't cut stone. Right?

The Shadow seemed reluctant to check. She easily sidestepped the creature's attack and thrust upward, driving the tip of the Midnight Shard into the enemy's neck. Augmented by one of Sunny's shadows, the sword went deep into the adamantine wood.

A moment later, the second shadow wrapped itself around the body of the taciturn demon, causing her skin to shine with dark radiance. The coral gem of the Broken Oath glowed brightly on her black breastplate.

Saint twisted her blade and pushed it sideways, causing half of the wood wraith's neck to explode into a rain of splinters. The creature staggered and lashed out with another strike, but it was too late — the Shadow calmly shifted her weight from one leg to another and delivered a devastating slash, beheading her enemy.

As the wraith fell apart and turned back into a pile of debris, she looked at it indifferently, and then hit the dull side of the Midnight Shard's blade against her shoulder twice.

The voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Sailor Doll.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Crap!'

Augmented by two shadows, Saint had defeated one of these Dolls without too much problem.

…However, there were countless more rising from the ground. Sunny counted at least several dozen before losing count.

'What should I do?'

Fighting the horde of Fallen Beasts was clearly suicide. He could either retreat, or order Saint to draw their attention away and sneak onto the ship.

He could also recall one of the shadows, send it ahead, and then use Shadow Step to travel instantly between his current position and the wreck. But that meant leaving Saint weaker.

Decisions, decisions…

'She should be fine for a few minutes, right?'

Throwing a glance at the taciturn demon, Sunny sighed and dashed toward the ship.

"Have fun, you three!"

Saint looked at him, then silently turned away and raised the Midnight Shard.

As Sunny jumped from shadow to shadow, something crashed thunderously behind him.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast…]

'But not too much fun…'

No matter how formidable his demon was when augmented by the shadow and wielding a powerful Memory, she was still just an Awakened. He had to be swift…

As Sunny appeared from a shadow, something massive suddenly lunged at him. Without slowing down, he dove under the blade of another wood wraith, then lashed out with the Cruel Sight. The silver blade of the sword cut through the body of the abomination, leaving a deep gash on its side.

Sunny slid on the moss, escaping from the attack reach of the massive creature. Twisting around, he thrust his sword into empty air. A split second later, however, the hilt of the somber weapon extended, turning it into a long spear. The silver blade pierced the chest of the wood wraith with surprising ease.

The Sailor Doll was still alive, but its soul was damaged. It staggered and took a step forward, driving the spear deeper into its flesh. Sunny tilted his head, then dissolved into shadows and appeared behind the creature. A moment later, the Moonlight Shard pierced its head.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Sailor Doll.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny retrieved his weapons.

[You have slain…]

Saint was busy, too.

Glancing back, he saw that she was close to being surrounded by a mass of menacing wooden creatures.

'Not good…'

Not wasting any more time, Sunny turned away and continued moving toward the wreck.

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A few minutes later, Sunny reached the broken ship, dove into one of the breaches in its hull, and hid in the shadows. Then, he immediately dismissed Saint.

Making sure that nothing pose an immediate threat to him, he then quickly checked on the taciturn demon in the Soul Sea. The Shadow had received several wounds in the fight against the swarm of wraiths, but none of them were too serious. She was going to have to spend some time restoring herself in the nurturing black flames of the Shadow Core, still.

'Rest well, Saint. You deserve it…'

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then retrieved the Memories he had entrusted to her. Who knew what he was going to encounter inside the ancient ship… it was better to be safe than sorry.

Looking around, he studied the interior of a small room he had found himself in.

Sunny had no knowledge whatsoever of what the insides of a ship were supposed to look like, let alone of an archaic wooden vessel like this one. That was why he couldn't even guess what purpose this cabin had been intended for. All he saw were piles of debris… absolutely mundane, for a change… and thick brown vines covering the walls.

The air was stale and murky. It smelled a little sweet…

'Oh, crap. Here we go again.'

With a subtle shudder, Sunny stared at the strange reddish-brown vines.

Those things, without a doubt, were alive.

…They were also the source of the sweet smell permeating the air that Sunny was currently breathing.

What was even worse, they were obviously just a small part of some much, much larger organism.

As a strange feeling appeared in his lungs, Sunny sighed, took a piece of cloth from his pack, and wrapped it tightly around the lower part of his face.

'Blood Weave to the rescue. Let's see what's inside…'

He only took a few steps when something gleamed on the floor in front of him.

Bending down, Sunny picked up the small object and stared at it with a complicated expression.

A heavy golden coin rested in his palm.

Chapter-419: Eureka

Grasping the coin in his fist, Sunny took a step forward, then cautiously walked around a thick vine sprawled across the floor of the small cabin.

Or was it a wall?

Since the ancient ship was laying on its side and at an angle, it was hard to differentiate the floor from the ceiling. The surface beneath Sunny's feet was skewed, forcing him to bend to be able to keep balance. The piles of debris and the vines weren't making things any easier for him.

By now, Sunny was almost sure that the vines were a part of a larger creature. His suspicion only grew when he climbed through the narrow doorway and left the cabin. Finding himself in a wide corridor, Sunny felt that the sweet smell permeating the murky air became much stronger.

Here, everything was covered by a thick layer of reddish moss, with twisted vines growing through it as they stretched in every direction. Sunny could not help but feel as though he was now inside some giant being, with the wooden carcass of the ancient ship serving as its bones, the moss representing its flesh, and the vines being its veins.

The warm breeze that blew through the wreck at rhythmic intervals reminded him of slow breathing of a slumbering giant. It came from somewhere deeper in the ship, bringing with it the sickeningly sweet smell, and then disappeared for a dozen seconds, only to appear again.

'Let's, uh… not do anything to awaken that thing, then.'

Sunny thought for a few moments, and then decided to keep both shadows wrapped around his body instead of sending them to explore

the ship. In situations where a confrontation with an unknown enemy could happen at any moment, having them close by was of paramount importance... at least that approach had saved his life many times in the past.

Taking a step forward, he felt the moss spring under his foot, and then swayed. His vision blurred slightly…

'Argh…'

His worst expectations did not come true. Unlike the Blood Blossom, the tiny grains of pollen — or spores, or whatever it was that he had breathed in — had not tried to take root in his lungs and grow through his flesh. Instead, they simply poisoned him.

The poison had entered his lungs, then traveled to his bloodstream, and was now spreading through his body. Sunny could easily see himself losing consciousness and falling to the ground, his body then becoming overgrown by the reddish moss, slowly digested by it, turned into nourishment for the creature that had usurped the wreck of the ancient ship…

But he wasn't going to.

As soon as the poison entered his bloodstream, Blood Weave went into a frenzy. It seemed to really dislike anything alien invading its territory. Slowly but surely, it went about destroying the toxin.

Sunny just had to endure the pain.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, he used the shaft of the spear to help himself keep balance and waited for his vision to become clear again. After a minute or two, Sunny slowly exhaled and continued on his way.

A few minutes later, still suffering from pain and weakness, he picked up a second coin from the moss and stared at it for a second.

The beautiful person with a crescent moon drawn on their forehead smiled at him with a carefree expression. Sunny frowned in response.

'What are you so happy about, fool?'

Turning away, he noticed another coin gleaming in the moss a couple of meters further down the corridor.

…It was almost as if someone left these coins here like breadcrumbs to lead an unsuspecting treasure hunter to their prize.

'...Very convenient.'

Full of unease, Sunny walked over to the third coin, picked it up, hid it in his pack, and then cautiously moved deeper into the wreck.

Soon, he approched a wall with a massive gate barring it. The wooden surface of the wall had cracked and was bent outward, as if something was pressing heavily on it from the other side. The vines out here were especially thick and vernicose, shining in the beams of sunlight that fell through a wide hole in the hull of the ship right above. The sweet smell in the air was almost overwhelming.

Sunny stared at the warped wall, a grim expression on his face. Although he could not see through it, he could feel the shapes of shadows on the other side.

Hidden from him by the thick bulkhead was a much larger, vast and open space. He judged it to be the main cargo hold of the ancient ship. And in it, something massive was moving, slowly expanding and contracting. Brown vines that had devoured the wreck all originated from that place.

The sickening breeze that blew through the ancient ship from time to time came simultaneously with the contracting of the massive shadow.

Sunny lingered for a while, then decided that he had no desire to disturb the slumber of that being. Instead of trying to open the door, he jumped up, grabbed the edges of the hole above him, and climbed onto the exterior of the ship's hull.

He was reasonably sure that a treasure such as miraculous coins would not have been stored in the main hold with the rest of the mundane cargo, anyway. Unless he was absolutely certain that he had no other choice, he was not going to enter it.

Sunny was of a rather high opinion about his abilities, but not so high as to forget all fear. That thing inside was not for him to fight, at least not yet. How was he supposed to kill a giant mass of vines and moss, anyway?

Instead of trying, he walked on the sloping hull of the ancient ship, carefully avoiding breaches through which thick brown vines were crawling outside, and soon passed the area of the main cargo hold.

Now, he was approaching the shattered bow of the ship. Out here, the hull was heavily damaged, with most of it being riddled with wide cracks, jagged holes, and splintered boards.

The sight of it made Sunny wonder about what had happened to the graceful ship he had seen on the miraculous coins. The vessel was obviously not an ordinary one... why had it crashed here, on that remote island? Why was its bow in such a devastated condition? What had the ship sailed on, to begin with? Had it just flown through the skies?

If so, maybe the Crushing had gotten to it.

Feeling that he wouldn't be able to remain hidden in the shadows on this treacherous surface, Sunny crawled back inside and landed softly on the carpet of moss.

…Just a few steps from where he found himself, several golden coins were gleaming on the ground, with one more laying further down the dark corridor.

Sunny cautiously gathered them, then moved deeper into the wreck.

It wasn't long before he found the compartment that must have served as the ship's treasury.

He knew that there was something special about it instantly… simply for the fact that the floorboards around the heavy door were the only place on the entire ancient ship that was completely free of the reddish moss, the vernicose vines, and the air near it was void of the sickeningly sweet smell of the poisonous spores.

Standing in front of the door, Sunny smiled.

'...Eureka!'

Chapter-420: Amazing Chest Ahead

Sunny approached the heavily reinforced door and tried to sense if something was moving on the other side of it.

There was nothing.

It didn't feel as though something dangerous waited for him inside the treasury. On the contrary, with how fresh the air was and how clean the floorboards were, the treasury looked almost… inviting.

He wasn't entirely convinced, though.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then commanded one of his shadows to separate itself from his body and slide under the door. It was going to remain very close, so he was willing to risk weakening himself for a bit.

'How do I even open this thing?'

A moment later, Sunny grimaced and covered his face with a palm.

'...When did I become this stupid?'

Looking through the eyes of the happy shadow, he saw the armored compartment in its entirety.

It was a large room, with a high ceiling and three heavy chests standing in its center.

The entire back wall of the treasury, though, was missing, letting in a flood of sunlight through the jagged edges of a massive breach.

'Of course it's missing!'

The Chain Worm had to have gotten inside somehow, after all. Sunny doubted that the demon could have fit through the door of the treasury, let alone politely lock it behind itself after leaving.

He sighed, then shook his head and decided to attribute this momentary lapse of judgment to the taxing nature of having to endure the pain of being poisoned.

No one was there to witness him making a fool out of himself, anyway!

Regardless, there was no terrifying Nightmare Creature laying in wait on the other side of the reinforced door. Nothing was going to attack him if he entered.

Sunny considered climbing back on top of the hull of the ship and finding a way to enter through the breach in the back wall of the treasury, then simply stepped through the shadows and appeared inside. He was too excited and impatient to waste any more time... not to mention that the more time he spent here, the more chances there were of something going terribly wrong.

If there were really hundreds of coins in one of those chests, though… that would be a trophy to put all other trophies to shame. A find of a lifetime.

Sunny waited for a couple of seconds, letting his eyes adapt to the bright light of the sun, and then studied the three chests standing in the middle of the armored compartment.

All three were open. Two stood empty, but the third…

His eyes widened in shock.

The third chest was long and adamantine, its dark wood reinforced by strips of dull metal. It was large enough to fit an adult man…

And filled to the brim with heavy gold coins. Some spilled out of it and were laying on the floor in a tantalizing pile, showing either the beautiful face of the mysterious charmer or the reverse depicting the ancient ship.

'Thousands… there are thousands of them!'

Sunny felt his heart skip a beat and swayed slightly.

In front of him was a treasure that would take him all the way to forming a third core, and then some. With this many miraculous coins, Sunny would be able to annihilate the gap between himself and Nephis… maybe even overtake her.

'This… this can't be true…'

He instinctively wanted to think that it had been far too easy… but it wasn't, really. He had almost died while fighting the Mirror Beast, allowed Saint to be injured in a fight against Sailor Dolls, walked through the poisonous darkness of the ancient wreck… if it wasn't for the Blood Weave, he would have been already dead.

How many people out there could boast about carrying the legacy of a daemon in their veins? For almost anyone else, this trip would have been fatal. Not to mention that very few could have made the series of discoveries and logical conclusions that would lead them here.

So no, it wasn't too easy to get to where he was currently standing. It wasn't easy at all. And anyway, Sunny was due for a bit of good luck. Recently, nothing had really gone his way… take this whole Mongrel fiasco, for example. Or everything that had happened in the Crimson Spire.

…The heavy chest stood silently, surrounded by sunlight. The golden coins shined in the bright radiance, inviting him to come and take them.

Sunny gulped. This sight was so beautiful. His eyes gleamed with avarice.

'Don't mind if I do…'

Taking several steps forward, he approached the chest.

'Gold is heavy. How am I going to carry all of this back to the Sanctuary? Damnation! I won't be able to enter the shadows with all that burden, too. That is a problem.'

He reached for the coins… but then stopped suddenly. His hand hovered just outside the invitingly opened chest.

Something… wasn't quite right.

Sunny frowned.

'What is it… huh, maybe I can bury the chest and make several trips… wait, no, what's wrong here?'

His frown deepened.

There was no danger inside the treasury. Nor was there anything moving outside of it. The terrifying creature that had been slumbering in the cargo hold of the ancient ship was still asleep. There were no Sailor Dolls wandering nearby, too. So what was disturbing him?

'The… the Chain Worm…'

The Chain Worm had swallowed several coins. He also had a piece of the chest in its stomach, the wood splintered, the strips of metal torn…

Sunny had even thought how lucky he was that the demon decided to feast on the metal reinforcing the chest and bit a chunk out of it, swallowing the coins in the process.

So, if he had torn a piece from the chest… why wasn't the chest missing a piece?

And what had mortally wounded the Chain Worm, anyway?

Confused, Sunny glanced at the two empty chests. They were perfectly whole, with no parts missing. Then, he looked back at the large, heavy chest in front of him, his hand still hovering a few centimeters away from the pile of gold inside.

The chest had all its corners, too.

…One of them, though, was of a slightly different color. Like a patch of new skin that had grown over a wound, and didn't quite match all

the rest.

Since when were chests capable of healing?

'What the h...'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, though, the chest seemed to have sensed his hesitation. It suddenly lurched forward, and as massive jagged teeth suddenly appeared from beneath the gold, its heavy lid closed on Sunny's hand with a sickening sound of breaking bones...

Chapter-421: Ecstasy of Gold

As golden coins moved, revealing several rows of terrifying triangular teeth, Sunny recoiled… but it was too late. The heavy lid of the chest suddenly came to life and closed with astonishing speed, another row of fangs appearing from behind its edge.

'What…'

Just a fraction of a second before the creature sunk its teeth into his forearm, Sunny's other hand shot forward. The blade of the Cruel Sight slid between the falling guillotine of the chest's lid and the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud. A moment later, the chest closed, and Sunny screamed.

Because of his quick reaction, the creature failed to bite his whole hand off. However, its jaws turned out to be horribly powerful. With a sickening sound, the bones in his arms shattered. Neither the leather vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud nor the augmentation of the shadow managed to resist the terrible strength of the gluttonous chest.

Sunny found himself caught in the abomination's crushing maw, with the blade of Cruel Sight laying flat on top of his broken arm and protecting it from being pierced by the sharp teeth that protruded from the lid of the chest. From below, several triangular fangs were slowly sinking into his vambrace. There was no obvious way to free himself...

'What the hell is that thing?!'

As several coins fell out of the creature's mouth and rolled on the floor, the chest pressed down harder, making Sunny shriek from blinding pain.

"B—bastard! Let go of me, you vile piece of rotten wood!"

Instead of doing that, the chest moved closer, forcing Sunny to fall to his knees. Something wet and coarse touched his hand, and a disturbingly long and wide tongue emerged from beneath the golden coins, sliding across his arm and dripping with viscous saliva.

Then, the tongue moved toward his neck.

Sunny stared at the horrid sight in outrage, then screamed:

"What the Spell?!"

As the second shadow wrapped itself around his body, gifting him a vast boost in strength, Sunny tried to pull his broken arm out of the abomination's maw, but its bite was just too damn overbearing. All he accomplished was almost knocking himself out from the pain of bone shards scraping against each other.

"Argh! Crap!"

As the unnaturally long tongue of the chest almost reached Sunny's neck, he growled, and then commanded the Cruel Sight to turn into a spear. At the same time, he activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment with a burst of shadow essence, embuing the silver blade with soul-destroying power.

The Memory extended inside the creature's mouth, hitting it in the back of the… whatever it had instead of a throat. The tip of the spear sunk into the adamantine wood only by a centimeter or two... the wound was by no means serious, but it must have hurt the chest a lot, because it suddenly let out a shrill shriek, and then spat Sunny's maimed arm out.

Sunny fell to the floor and rolled away, then rose to one knee.

'Yes!'

Before he could celebrate getting his freedom back, however, the chest suddenly swayed… and then rose into the air, revealing a gaunt and revolting body hiding beneath. More coins rolled on the floor.

The abomination must have been a masterful contortionist, because at its full height, it was almost three meters tall. Sunny had no idea

how the creature managed to hide all that bony flesh inside the fake chest, even if the chest was large enough to swallow a human whole.

Its long and emaciated limbs unfolded with repulsive cracking sounds, and then, it towered menacingly above Sunny, the long tongue dripping with saliva.

'Oh, curse it a…'

Before he could even react, the creature moved one of its long legs… and kicked him in the chest with the force of a derailing train.

Sunny's body shot back, smashed through the reinforced door of the armored compartment, and rolled into the corridor outside.

He tried to groan, but all the air had been knocked out of his lungs by the terrible collision. His skull seemed to be in one piece, as was his spine… barely. It did feel, however, as though his entire body had recently suffered from being stomped on by a whole herd of elephants.

In his disoriented state, Sunny couldn't help but think confusedly:

'...Elephant… what the hell is an elephant?'

Then, however, all thoughts disappeared from his head, because he noticed the vile creature falling on all fours, and then launching itself forward, the lid of the chest rising for another bite.

When the abomination landed, though, there was nothing to bite into. Sunny had used Shadow Step and fell out of a shadow ten meters further into the corridor, then landed awkwardly on his broken arm and whimpered.

'Oh, damn… that hurts…'

The toothy chest hovered in the air for a couple of moments, as if bewildered, then slowly turned to face him.

Sunny sighed, then picked himself up from the floor and tried to stand up.

His first attempt failed.

Gritting his teeth and hiding how much pain he was currently experiencing, Sunny threw a furious glance at the creature and growled:

"Come here, you bastard!"

With that, he used the Cruel Sight to help himself stand up, and then pointed the spear at the creature.

The chest tilted to the side.

'How come… it seems as though the bastard is grinning? How can a chest even grin?!'

But there was no mistaking it — the abomination was mocking him. It became especially apparent after a grating, high-pitched giggle escaped from somewhere inside it.

The sound of it was so offensive, both to Sunny's pride and his ears, that he would rather have his arm broken all over again than listen to it.

'Funny, is it?'

Sunny smiled, then unhurriedly lowered the spear…

And thrust it into one of the thick brown vines sprawled on the floorboards in front of him.

The abomination's giggle abruptly stopped.

It froze and stared at Sunny, as if utterly stunned.

…And then trembled.

'Not so funny now, huh?'

A moment later, the entire ship trembled, too.

Chapter-422: Rude Awakening

Whatever it was that slumbered in the cargo hold of the ancient ship did not like one of its vines being damaged, let alone having its soul cut by a sharp blade. As the whole wreck trembled, a strong gust of warm, pungent wind hit Sunny in the back, tousling his hair. The air became even murkier than it had been before.

The chest creature froze, staring at him with something that resembled a mortified expression. Even its tongue stopped swaying in the air and retreated back under the pile of golden coins.

Now, it was Sunny's turn to grin. An evil gleam appeared in his eyes. Retrieving the Cruel Sight, he said:

"Goodness gracious. How clumsy of me."

The abomination lingered for a few moments, gave him a hateful look, and turned slightly toward the door of the treasury. Then, however, it halted.

'Don't tell me…'

Faced with the terrible danger of facing the awakened master of the wreck, the creature was still hesitating. The prey was right in front of it…

To Sunny's misfortune, he and the bizarre monstrosity shared one fundamental character flaw.

Both were very, very greedy.

Before he could even blink, the abomination suddenly turned back and lunged at him with a shrill giggle rumbling from somewhere in the depths of it. All Sunny could do was spend more essence and use Shadow Step again, appearing on the spot where the creature had

been a second ago.

As he slipped on the debris of the shattered door and fell, the abomination shot through the air and crushed into the wall of the corridor, pulverizing the wooden boards and getting entangled in the vines covering them. It huffed and puffed, then tried to extricate itself from the mess of glistening vines.

…However, they wouldn't let go.

In fact, as Sunny watched in horror, the whole corridor moved. The reddish-brown mass that it was overgrown with rippled, and the thick vines crawled toward the trapped creature, long thorns suddenly appearing on their vernicose surface.

The abomination giggled again, this time nervously, and doubled its efforts to free itself, slashing at the vines with its talons and biting into them with its terrifying teeth. As sickeningly pungent juice flowed into its maw, the creature shuddered.

'Crap, crap, crap…'

Turning on his stomach, Sunny lunged himself forward and rolled into the treasury. Here, there were no vines and no moss, only two empty chests and a scattering of gold coins gleaming on the floor.

As he hesitated, thinking of what to do next, something crashed with a deafening noise in the corridor behind him, and a moment later, the tall silhouette of the gaunt monstrosity appeared in the doorway.

Sunny's eyes widened, and he brandished the Cruel Sight, preparing to defend himself.

The abomination, however, did not pay him any attention anymore. Jumping over Sunny, it landed in the middle of the armored compartment… and then ran as fast as it could toward the breach in the back wall.

Without stopping even for a second, it reached the breach and dove through it, escaping the awakening wreck. Sunny followed its escape with his eyes, and then blinked.

'...Huh.'

Then, his gaze fell on the floor of the treasury.

The coins were still there, glinting in the bright sunlight. They didn't disappear or dissipate after the creature had run away. The coins… were real.

'They're real…'

As the ancient ship shook and trembled, and the mass of vines crawled toward the treasury, Sunny gritted his teeth and lunged toward the coins, grabbing them and pushing them into his pack.

'Real, they're real…'

He was in such a hurry to gather all the coins that he even cut himself slightly on the piece of mirror that was still stored in the pack.

"Ouch!"

'If these coins are real… then the rest of them inside that damned chest are real, too.'

Perhaps there weren't as many as he had thought, since the chest turned out to have a false… everything, but just the top layer that was visible to the naked eyes had to contain a thousand or more coins, at least.

As Sunny hunted down the last shiny golden disk left in the treasury, his attention was elsewhere.

It was concentrated on his shadow — the one he had hidden in the abomination's own shade when it jumped over him. Now, the shadow was following the bizarre creature as it ran toward the edge of the island, its gangly arms swaying in the air.

Sunny expected it to be assaulted by the Sailor Dolls, but the menacing wood wraiths seemed to be retreating from the wreck themselves. Some even dropped to the ground, turning back into piles of debris.

…The ground was moving.

'Well, what do you know…'

He thought that the Dolls learned to fall apart and reassemble themselves as a way to combat the Crushing, since many Nightmare Creatures on the Isles had adapted to its harsh reality in one way or another… but maybe, this peculiar ability had initially been just the means to hide themselves from the being that inhabited the wreck.

In any case, he couldn't let the chest escape. Not when a thousand shadow fragments were hidden inside the abominable thing!

Palming the last coin, Sunny threw the pack over his shoulder, then picked up the Cruel Sight and stood up. A determined expression appeared on his face.

The abomination was already halfway to the edge of the island.

"Where are you running, bastard?"

Diving into the shadows, he expended a large burst of essence and appeared out of his own shadow right in front of the creature. Since he could only use one hand now, the weapon Memory had turned back into a shortsword.

Before the abomination could react, the Cruel Sight lashed out and bit it into its thigh. The silver blade went all the way through, escaping from the back of it in a rain of black blood.

The chest let out a startled shriek… and then the monstrosity tumbled to the ground, rolling over its head and sending pieces of moss and mud flying into the air. The force of its crash was so fearsome that the ground trembled.

Or… was there another reason?

Before Sunny could do anything, brown vines shot from under the moss, wrapping themselves around the body of the bizarre abomination.

One of them, however, slid around his leg instead.

Chapter-423: Risk and Reward

'Not good…'

The vine wasn't as large as some of the ones Sunny had seen back on the ancient ship, but it was still as thick as a man's arm, with curved black thorns protruding from its glistening surface.

The vine brought the sickeningly sweet smell with it.

Sunny hacked at it with the Cruel Sight, but barely managed to break the vine's skin. As a fine aerosol of aromatic juice shot into the air, the damned thing moved.

His eyes widened.

The vine easily shredded the leather boot of the Puppeteer's Shroud, as if the Awakened armor of the fifth Tier was made out of tissue paper. Before the sharp thorns could saw off his foot, however, Sunny cursed and brought the Cruel Sight down once more, this time augmenting the silver blade with both of his shadows.

The shortsword hacked through the vine, severing the stretch of it that was wrapped around Sunny's leg. The rest of it didn't like being cut one bit: surging forward, it aimed at his torso. Several more appeared from beneath the moss and shot at Sunny, too.

However, now that nothing was holding him, he could finally use Shadow Step again. Before the vines reached his body, Sunny turned into a shadow. Safe and sound in their tranquil embrace of the darkness… for now, at least… he slid a few meters away and stared at the struggling abomination.

The creature was entangled by several thick vines, which moved across its body, leaving bloody trails on it. Sparks flew as the black thorns scraped fruitlessly across the adamantine surface of the

wooden chest, though. It seemed to be much tougher than the rest of the creature's body.

The monstrosity gathered its limbs underneath it, then pushed with all its might, trying to stand up. An angry shriek escaped from its maw.

The vines were trying to hold it down, but either they were much weaker here, far away from the wreck, or the abomination was much stronger than Sunny had thought. It raised to its knees, then lashed out with its talons, ripping two of the vines apart.

Suddenly liberated, the monstrosity crawled from underneath the remaining vines, and then dashed toward the edge of the island on all fours.

Sunny hissed.

'Crap!'

Why couldn't it just lay still and die?!

He escaped the shadow and ran after the unreasonably swift abomination… but it was too late.

Just a few moments later, the bizarre creature reached the very edge of the island and jumped off of it without slowing even for a moment. The lid of the chest clicked close as it plummeted down.

"What the hell!"

Sunny reached the edge a few seconds later and froze as he looked down.

A grim expression appeared on his face.

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Some distance below, a gargantuan heavenly chain escaped from the mouth of a stone structure similar to the one Sunny had seen on the other side of the island. This one was slightly different, though, mainly because both of the massive stone pillars had broken and

collapsed a long time ago.

…The chain itself was different, too.

Sunny had never seen such a thing on the Chained Isles. It seemed… sick, somehow. Weakened. The chain was covered in rust, its iron links dim and lifeless, robbed of their usual sense of indestructible stability.

This one was rather long, stretching for good ten kilometers or so into the distance. Because the Shipwreck Island continued to descend, it was slightly angled upward. Sunny could see a relatively small isle on the other end of the chain, far into the distance.

…And everywhere in between, grotesque Chain Worms were crawling all over the weakened heavenly chain.

Now that Sunny saw them alive, he understood that he had underestimated just how disturbing these creatures were. With their long serpentine tails, human-like torsos, and long muzzles that brimmed with dagger-like fangs, the demons looked like misshapen maggots devouring the dying chain.

…Or maybe it was already dead, and they were simply feasting on its corpse.

Some were thin like the one Sunny had seen before, some engorged on the rusty iron and bloated beyond any reasonable measure, towering above the damaged chain like small hills of flesh. The scales on the latter ones looked like they were now made out of steel, and shined as they reflected the sunlight.

Those who had not satiated their hunger yet were much thinner and flew around, resembling giant metal dragonflies.

'...Crap.'

The damned chest creature landed directly on the rusted heavenly chain, gathered its long limbs, and dashed away from the Shipwreck Island, swaying dangerously as it went. From time to time, it fell to all fours and launched itself into the air, jumping from one link to another.

It wasn't long before the bizarre abomination encountered a Chain Worm. The winged creature lunged at it… only to be kicked in the muzzle and have one of its wings ruthlessly torn apart.

The chest creature tossed the maimed Chain Worm back toward the island, where its body was suddenly grabbed by a long root that lazily extended from the darkness of the Dark Side, then disappeared from view.

The abomination took in the terrible sight, giggled, then turned around, and continued running away.

Sunny hesitated.

His prize was getting away. But…

The small island he could see in the distance had to be the Twisted Rock — the isle directly bordering the Tear. There would be no more land to escape to if he went there.

And the only chain that connected Twisted Rock to the Chained Isles was currently being devoured by the demonic Worms. It didn't seem to be on the verge of collapse just yet, however… how would Sunny know? It's not like he had seen a heavenly chain break before.

Perhaps it was time to give up on his pursuit and turn back.

He lingered on the very edge of the island, sensing brown vines crawling closer and closer.

Risk it all or retreat and lose the chance to get his hands on the miraculous treasure forever? Nephis was about to become a devil in just a few days…

No matter what decision he was going to make, he had to make it right now.

In the end, Sunny had to silence his avarice and consider the situation objectively. Going after the bizarre abomination posed a huge risk… but it also promised a huge reward.

In the end, what made him decide was not greed, emotions, or even

rational thought. It was his intuition.

For whatever reason, Sunny felt a strong aversion to the idea of turning back. It was as though Twisted Rock exerted an invisible pull on him, drawing him closer. He had never experienced something like this, at least not to this degree.

He knew that his intuition was not a simple thing. It was connected to the [Fated] Attribute and the special properties his eyes had inherited from Weaver. Somehow, Sunny was capable of perceiving the trembling of the strings of fate around him, from time to time.

Considering how strong his intuition was pushing him toward the Twisted Rock, something out there had to be of utmost importance to his fate, or at least have a connection to it.

'...Fine. Let's get those coins!'

With a grim expression, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and dove into the empty abyss of the skies.

Chapter-424: Unlucky Streak

Sunny glided through the skies, tensely observing the underside of the Shipwreck Island through the eyes of his shadow. The chain ahead of him was teeming with a swarm of Fallen Demons, but behind him… he didn't even want to know what the thing hiding in the darkness was.

One thing became clear, though, and it was why none of the Chain Worms had tried to devour the iron giant that swayed in the wreckage of a broken heavenly chain… or rather, had succeeded in trying to bite a piece out of him. The dead colossus was like cheese in the mousetrap, attracting these vile creatures into the range at which the being that dwelled in the perpetual darkness could catch them.

Sunny was sure that many Chain Worms had attempted to feast on the iron giant, but ended up being the feast instead.

Currently, he was trying to avoid the same fate.

Luckily, the Dark Wing allowed him to glide diagonally away from the Shipwreck Island instead of plunging straight down, avoiding the attack range of the terrifying being. He reached the chain without attracting the attention of the bottom dweller, and instantly became a shadow, hiding on its underside.

Waiting for a few moments, Sunny studied the length of the heavenly tether in front of him.

'...Not too bad.'

A large section of the unusually long chain hung low, reaching the Sky Below. He would be able to ride most of it without being noticed by the Chain Worms. The last stretch of it, though… Sunny was going to have to use Shadow Step to jump from shadow to shadow if he wanted to avoid having to fight a swarm of the Fallen Demons.

The problem was that his reserves of shadow essence were already running low. Except for the short walk across the hull of the ancient ship, Sunny had no chance to really replenish it. In the meantime, he had used a lot to get to the wreck, fight the damnable chest abomination, and pursue it. Chances were, he would reach the Twisted Rock with no essence to spare whatsoever.

How was he even going to kill the vile chest, especially with one of his arms broken?

He hesitated for a bit, then rushed forward, swiftly reaching the section of the chain submerged into the Sky Below and continuing to fly through the darkness once there. To avoid tempting fate, Sunny remained on the underside of the gargantuan tether, where there were way fewer Worms crawling around.

He did, however, encounter several, and saw up close how they were tearing into the rusting iron of the chain as he silently flew past. The sight of it was simultaneously disturbing, fascinating… and strangely sad.

'All things must come to an end, I guess…'

Even those as seemingly eternal as the miraculous heavenly chains.

...Soon, he caught up with the chest creature and followed it from the shadows. The bizarre monstrosity was still running as fast as it could, jumping from link to link and using its long gangly limbs to keep balance. From time to time, it got into a short and vicious fight with one of the Chain Worms and either left them severely wounded, or promptly escaped with a ghastly wound or two of its own.

By now, its grating giggles grew somewhat miserable, as well as menacingly angry.

Sunny observed its fighting habits, thinking about how to deal with it best.

At the same time, he was meticulously calculating the amount of shadow essence he would have to spend to cross the last section of the way to the Twisted Rock, trying to find a way to keep his reserves

as high as possible.

…His calculations, though, had turned out to be for naught.

When both Sunny and the chest monstrosity were about halfway to the small island, a dreadful sound reached their ears.

It was the rattling of the chain.

Sunny froze for a moment, then glanced toward the goal of this journey.

'Oh, no…'

The Twisted Rock had entered its ascent phase, and was now rising quickly into the sky.

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'Curse it all!'

Sunny remembered thinking that he was in luck today, and couldn't help but growl… mentally, of course, since he had no vocal cords currently.

Where the hell was this supposed luck?!

The fact that the Twisted Rock was ascending meant two things for him.

One was that he would have to act fast and try to kill the chest creature before the Crushing became too terrible, or somehow obliterate the damned thing while being weighed down by it.

The second was that the position of the heavenly chain was swiftly shifting, making it so that the stretch of it submerged into the Sky Below was becoming shorter and shorter.

This meant that he would have to spend much more essence to reach the island without attracting the attention of the swarm of Chain Worms. And he didn't have a lot of essence to spare, to begin with…

'Damn it!'

As the angle of the chain increased and the bizarre monstrosity swayed, then fell on all fours and rushed forward even faster, Sunny tried to deal with the resentment growing in his heart and followed it.

'...Was my intuition wrong?'

Things didn't seem too good for him right now.

Soon, the two of them emerged from the darkness of the Sky Below and saw the sunlight again. The chest creature seemed indifferent to it, but to Sunny, it was an ill omen.

Out here in the sunlit expanse of the Sky Above, the heavenly chain was not covered in an uninterrupted layer of shadows anymore. That meant that he couldn't move through it unobstructed. Instead, Sunny had to either step from one shadow to another, if they were close enough, or send his own forward and make use of it to jump over long stretches of brightly lit parts of the heavenly tether.

'Damn it...'

Knowing that there was no other choice now, Sunny burned through his essence in order to not fall behind the rushing monstrosity.

Soon, his reserves grew dangerously low. It was still enough to reach the Twisted Rock… probably… but once there, he would have to fight while both of his cores were nearly empty.

That meant no bursts of speed, strength, and resilience that he had already gotten used to.

No access to active enchantment like the [Dark Mirror].

No more using Shadow Step to escape dangerous situations, at least for a while.

…And added to all that, one of his arms was broken and completely useless.

Oh, and there was also the Crushing.

If Sunny had teeth in his shadow form — or a mouth, for that matter — he would have gritted them right now. Full of dark emotions, he thought:

'...Doesn't matter. I'm getting these coins even if it kills me!'

Chapter-425: Twisted Rock

Soon, the vile creature drew close to the Twisted Rock. It crouched near the vertical stone wall of the floating island, giggled, and then suddenly shot upward, jumping no less than twenty meters high. Its talons pierced the weathered stone, and the abomination nimbly climbed up, soon disappearing from view.

Far below, on the rusted surface of the damaged heavenly chain, a hunched human figure suddenly appeared from the deep shadows.

Sunny felt the chain sway as the island rose higher and higher, then looked up with a dark expression.

In this direction, Twisted Rock was the last piece of land before the empty expanse of the Tear. It also only had one iron tether connecting it to the rest of the Chained Isles, so now that the bizarre monstrosity was up there, it had nowhere else to run.

With a pained grimace, Sunny summoned the Moonlight Shard, cut one of the straps off his pack, then tied it around his neck to create a makeshift sling for his broken arm. He was going to have to set the bones and make a proper splint later, but for now, this was going to have to do.

With his arm secured and cradled against his chest, Sunny waited a few seconds for the sharp pain to subside, then activated the Dark Wing and used the Prowling Thorn to fly up the overhanging slope of the stone island.

The dragonfly cloak only allowed him to levitate if there was a surface beneath it to support the enchantment. If there wasn't, he was only able to slowly glide down instead of falling without any control. So, to travel up, he had to either push off of something or pull himself toward something. The Prowling Thorn made that process easier.

Due to the burden of the early stages of the Crushing, Sunny had to exert more strength than usual to propel himself upward. After using the heavy kunai to do so several times, he finally crested the edge of the Twisted Rock and soared a few meters above it.

The Twisted Rock… was a dreadful and miserable place.

The island was rather small, and all of its surface was nothing but an uneven expanse of dark stone. That stone, however, looked really strange. It was as if once, a long time ago, it had been melted by unimaginable heat and then abruptly solidified again, creating strange shapes and swirls.

…Here and there, blackened bones protruded from the molten stone, telling the tale of countless humans and beasts who had drowned in that scorching inferno. The sight of them was eerie and disturbing, like something torn from the actual hell.

Thrown down by the Crushing, Sunny landed heavily on the dark stone and swayed, then supported himself with the shaft of the Cruel Sight.

His graceless arrival made enough noise to attract the attention of the chest fiend, who was crouched a dozen or so meters away.

The creature froze, then turned around and faced him.

Sunny scowled.

…A mangled corpse of a Chain Worm was hanging from beneath the half-closed lid of the chest. As the creature turned, the tail and claws of the dead Fallen Demon scraped across the molten stone.

The bizarre abomination stared at Sunny for a few moments, then opened its maw and swallowed the remainder of the Chain Worm whole. Despite the fact that the demon was at least five times bigger than the chest that served the fiend as the head, it somehow disappeared inside without leaving a trace. The creature licked the blood off its sharp teeth and giggled.

This time, its laugh sounded rather hateful.

A cold smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"Right back at you, bastard."

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As the fiend rose to its feet, towering above Sunny menacingly at its full three meters of height, the Cruel Sight shifted and turned into a somber shortsword. Its silver blade gleamed, seemingly absorbing the bright sunlight.

The heavenly chain rattled below, and as its rusted links scraped against each other, the Twisted Rock continued to ascend.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

Staring at the gluttonous abomination, he couldn't help but feel a bit of fear. The thing was tall, fast, and incredibly strong… much stronger than he was, especially now that his reserves of shadow essence were almost completely drained.

Despite the fact that it was heavily wounded, both by his sword and by the claws of the Chain Worms, it still appeared agile, vigorous, and full of murderous spite.

However, this fight was not going to be as suicidal as it might have seemed. There were three main reasons why Sunny felt confident in his chances of defeating the bizarre abomination.

The first one was hanging on a thread tied around his neck. It was a beautiful amulet in the form of a crimson flower… the Blood Blossom.

The fiend was bleeding heavily from the deep cut on its thigh, which had been left there by the sharp blade of the Cruel Sight, and from a multitude of ugly wounds delivered to the gaunt body of the monstrosity by the Chain Worms it had fought while traversing the heavenly chain.

The more black blood flowed from those wounds, the more the morbid charm Memory enhanced both the Puppeteer's Shroud and the Cruel Sight, as well as any other Memory Sunny would want to

use.

The second reason was rather simple, and it was the fundamental difference between the two of them. The abomination might have been stronger and faster than Sunny, but it lacked his combat skill and insight. As long as the gap in power was not absolutely overwhelming, a polished technique could turn the tide of any battle.

More than that, fighting things that were bigger and more powerful than him was more or less Sunny's specialty by now.

However, the third reason was the most important, and the one he hoped to exploit the most.

Yes, the fiend was stronger than Sunny… but it was also much, much larger and heavier than him. That meant that it was going to be affected by the Crushing much more. No matter how bad it was going to get for Sunny, it was going to be many times worse for the towering abomination.

Out here on the Chained Isles, being small and lithe was sometimes a great advantage.

Feeling the burden of the Crushing pressing down on him more and more, Sunny raised his sword and aimed it at the bizarre fiend.

'...Let's see which one of us is going to break first.'

Chapter-426: Most Terrible Battle

The fiend shifted its weight, then lunged forward with a shrill giggle. It was terrifyingly powerful and fast, but because its movements were clearly telegraphed, Sunny had plenty of time to react.

Diving under the long arm of the abomination, he narrowly avoided being torn apart by the sharp talons and lashed out with the Cruel Sight. As the silver blade bit into the abdomen of the creature, piercing its tough skin just under the ribs, he continued forward and spun.

Just a split second later, Sunny was already behind the enemy.

…However, he wasn't safe.

Without pausing even for a moment, the bizarre monstrosity pressed its hands against the ground and then kicked back with both legs. There was enough power in that strike to shatter a small hill, but Sunny was already moving, getting out of range.

He had not observed how the fiend fought against the Chained Worms for nothing. He knew that the wretched thing could use all four of its limbs to attack, and that its joints seemed to be able to bend in any direction. Not only did he know what the abomination was capable of, he also knew what it liked and tended to do.

He also knew where it was most vulnerable, and where none of his weapons would be able to do any harm. That's why he had aimed for its gaunt body instead of the much larger and obvious target — the chest itself.

Sunny had always been very perceptive, and practicing Shadow Dance only sharpened his ability to observe and understand such

things. Maybe it was thanks to that that he had managed to learn so much about the fiend so fast.

As the soles of his boots scraped against the dark stone, a fleeting thought passed through his mind:

'How would it feel to shadow a Nightmare Creature… I wonder…'

Then, he had no more time for unnecessary thoughts.

Crushing through blackened bones, the abomination bent its joints in the opposite direction of where they were supposed to turn, spun, and lunged at him once again. This time, it was moving on all fours, the lid of the chest serving as its lower jaw. That made it almost impossible for him to dodge out of the way.

…Sunny had no idea why the golden coins weren't spilling out, but luckily, they seemed to be held in place by some strange force.

Unable to use his maimed arm to help himself keep balance, he had no choice but to jump down and roll under the attacking fiend. The Cruel Sight flashed again, leaving a deep cut on the leg of the creature.

At the same time, a pulse of sharp pain radiated through Sunny's entire body… even though he took care to protect his broken bones, he couldn't keep them from scraping against one another completely.

But the worse pain was still to come.

'That is going to hurt…'

Sunny had already known that he would not be able to get back to his feet before the next attack came. Due to the fact that the abomination would have to perform it from an awkward position, it was not going to be as devastating as the previous blows. The Crushing had also become considerable enough to slow down both of their movements…

But those long and sharp talons were absolutely deadly even if there was not much force behind them.

As the fiend pivoted and snapped one of its limbs in his direction, Sunny sent both of his shadows from his body to encompass the Puppeteer's Shroud. A moment later, the talons slashed across his torso… and slid from the lusterless black leather of the chest guard without piercing it.

The strike itself, however, was still powerful enough to throw Sunny flying back. He counted on that, though, and used the momentum to create distance between himself and the vile creature. Landing on his feet, Sunny suppressed a groan and brandished the Cruel Sight once again.

As the heavenly chain rattled, Twisted Rock rose even higher, and the burden of the Crushing suddenly pressed him down even more.

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Some time later, Sunny was on the verge of passing out from exhaustion and pain.

"Argh! Curse you!"

He staggered back and hunched over, using the shaft of the Cruel Sight to keep himself standing upright. His breath was ragged and pained, and drops of both sweat and blood were rolling down his face.

Things… were not going great.

For the both of them, actually.

The ferocious clash between himself and the vile giggling fiend had gone for much longer than either of them had ever expected. After the first few minutes, it had become apparent that neither one could easily kill the other.

Sunny was too devious and slippery to be caught by the bizarre creature, and the damned chest monster was too vigorous and resilient to succumb to the dozens of shallow wounds that Sunny had delivered to it. What's worse, all of its vital organs seemed to be hidden inside the chest, which was nearly indestructible.

It was the most terrible battle of all…

A battle between two cockroaches!

As the result, their fight lasted for a simply stupid amount of time.

By now, both were in rough shape. Sunny was almost dead from exhaustion, bleeding from several ugly wounds, and in a world of pain. The abomination looked even worse. Its gaunt body seemed to have gone through a meat grinder, and its long tongue was hanging lifelessly over the edge of the chest, not even trying to move.

Neither was ready to give up, though.

The fiend panted heavily and stared at Sunny. Then, it giggled once again. This time, the giggle sounded tired, slightly bewildered… but mostly full of searing hatred.

The bastard really, really wanted to rip Sunny to shreds now.

Staggering forward, it tried to swipe at him with one hand, but crashed heavily to the ground instead. Lying there motionlessly, the bizarre creature let out a despondent growl.

The Crushing was almost unbearable by now. Sunny wasn't sure that he would be able to withstand it for much longer, so the abomination had to be having an extremely rough time, too. In fact, it was certainly being tortured by the oppressive force much more. Very soon, both of them were going to be completely immobilized.

He just had to kill it before that happened.

Not sure that he would be able to take another step, Sunny extended the Cruel Sight to its full length and thrust it forward. The silver blade pierced the skin of the fiend, causing more black blood to seep out.

'Good… bleed to death, you piece of crap!'

He could feel the enhancement of the Blood Blossom become a tiny bit stronger, but at this point, it was already meaningless. The charm was just an Awakened Memory of the second tier, after all.

Whatever boost it could provide was not that substantial when dealing with Fallen Nightmare Creatures and Ascended weapons, especially past the point where the incremental increases in its potency were truly substantial.

The abomination tried to dodge the attack, but failed to move fast enough due to the merciless pressure of the Crushing. It tried to stand up… but failed.

A grim smile appeared on Sunny's face.

'Got you…'

His enemy, it seemed, was now completely helpless. But Sunny could still move… he could still attack... he had not even used any of the shadow essence that had been accumulating in his cores this whole time. The reserves weren't large, but there was some...

Retrieving his spear, he gathered his strength, and then thrust it forward again, delivering another wound to the bizarre creature. And then again, and then…

'Die, just die already…'

…And then, the fiend giggled mockingly, and suddenly gathered its limbs, which then disappeared into the bottom of the chest. A few seconds later, the whole body of the creature was out of sight, leaving only the adamantine, indestructible chest standing in the middle of the stone island. The tip of the spear scraped against the dark wood, not leaving even a scratch on it.

Sunny stared at it, dumbfounded.

Then, he let out a yelp, and as the power of the Crushing increased even further, fell to his knees.

"What the hell?! Come back here, you coward!"

His hands trembled from strain as he lifted the Cruel Sight and struck the chest once again, to no result whatsoever.

Sunny seemed to have overexerted himself with that last strike,

because the spear fell out of his hands and plunged to the ground, striking the stone with enough force to send a few cracks through it. Then, it bounced and rolled away, finally getting caught on a piece of bone about two meters away.

He stared at the Cruel Sight with a shocked expression, and then dismissed the Memory instead of trying to walk… or crawl… that far to retrieve it.

Sunny turned to the chest and gritted his teeth. A moment later, sparks of light appeared around his hand again.

"Don't think that it's over!"

The lid of the chest trembled, and then rose a bit. The creature clearly strained to achieve even that much.

A gloating, hateful giggle emerged from the depths of it a moment later.

…That was the exact moment when Sunny tossed a polished crimson gem that had appeared in his hand toward the chest. Just a split second after the Broken Oath flew inside the abomination's maw, the lid snapped close, pressed down by the obliterating force of the Crushing.

A muffled sound resounded from within the chest, but no matter how much the lid trembled, it didn't rise again.

Sunny fell to the ground and laughed, then groaned and whimpered as he arduously crawled a few meters away and finally grew still just outside of the Broken Oath's soul-destroying reach.

Laying there in complete exhaustion, unable to move anymore, Sunny grinned.

"Who's laughing now? Try to swallow that, you bastard…"

Chapter-427: Death of a Mimic

The Twisted Rock soared higher and higher into the sky, and as it did, a terrible crushing force assaulted the two living beings that were pressed into its surface, separated only by a dozen meters of dark stone.

The large adamantine chest did not look too good. The wood was slowly losing its color, the strips of metal reinforcing it showed growing patches of rust. It seemed as though the creature was struck by some terrible disease. In a sense, it was… after all, the Broken Oath was currently destroying its soul bit by little bit.

Sunny did not look that much better, though.

He was laying on the hard stone, looking at the merciless skies, struggling to breathe and endure the pain. His armor was soaked in blood, and his broken arm was pressed tightly against his chest. His face was deathly pale, almost the same color as the tall and majestic Ivory Tower that floated high above the world, shrouded in the whitest of clouds.

Every breath was a torture.

Sunny knew that he was not going to bleed to death because of the Blood Weave, but the wounds still needed to be tended to. His broken bones, especially, were in need of attention. This Crushing was turning out to be tragically long, though, not giving him the chance to do so.

Well, that was not a surprise.

The single chain connecting the Twisted Rock to the rest of the Isles was much longer than most, which meant that the small island was going to rise very, very high. Higher than Sunny had ever been in this strange and deadly land.

The Crushing was not only going to last longer, but would also be vastly more terrible than the few previous times he had experienced it. By now, the hours of hardship he had endured together with Master Roan several days ago seemed like a pleasant walk in the park.

Now, it seemed as though he was being slowly crushed under the weight of the entirety of heaven.

Sunny was only alive because he didn't have to hide his powers anymore, and could use all of his abilities without restraint. Unlike on the day he had met the dashing griffin rider, both shadows were now tightly wrapped around his body, augmenting its resilience threefold. For that reason, he had not turned into a puddle of bloody goo yet. Although it certainly felt as though he was getting close…

If things became really unbearable, he could still escape into the shadows and either wait out the worst part of the Crushing or try to escape back to the heavenly chain before his shadow essence ran out. Since he had spent this whole time patiently circulating it through the coils of the Soul Serpent, there was a considerable amount flowing through his cores by now.

He had also spent this whole time waiting for the damn chest fiend to finally die, as well as considering his options on how to transport the gold coins back to the Sanctuary of Noctis.

Since it had turned out that only the upper layer of the treasure pile was real, he now had much more options… however, all of them required him to burn through a lot of essence to cross back through the swarm of Chain Worms. The problem was confounded by the fact that Twisted Rock was going to be destroyed soon, which meant that he could not risk making several trips to the Citadel and back.

He had to carry his spoils away while the island was still attached to the rest of the Chained Isles.

For that reason, Sunny was trying to endure as much of the Crushing as he could before turning into a shadow.

…He also did not forget about the strange way his intuition had

reacted to the dying island. Before the burden of the Crushing became too overbearing, he had sent one of his shadows to scour the whole place in search of anything that might have been important enough to affect the strings of fate.

However, there was literally nothing on the Twisted Rock except for barren stone and ancient, blackened bones. The shadow explored every nook and cranny of this miserable place, only to find nothing at all.

He had even sent it to take a look at the underside of the small isle, but it was as empty and desolate as the rest of it.

Sunny was left very confused by that turn of events. He was certain that there was nowhere on the Twisted Rock that he had failed to search. And yet, there was nothing on the island to cause his intuition to react so strongly. What was going on? Had he failed to notice something, or was he mistaken about the whole thing, to begin with?

Sadly, after a while, the Crushing had become too terrible for him to endure without the help of the second shadow, so he had to call it back.

And now, here they were.

A sudden sound attracted Sunny's attention. Glancing sideways, he noticed that a crack had appeared on the surface of the adamantine chest. Black blood seeped out of it, soon turning into a stream. A few seconds later, a second crack appeared near the first.

He would have smiled if not for the fact that even such a simple action was rather strenuous now, this high above the Sky Below.

'It's not going to be too long now…'

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A few minutes later, there was a pool of black blood surrounding the large wooden chest.

Sunny endured the pain and counted the seconds.

Before he reached a thousand, the vile creature trembled slightly and giggled one last time, its grating voice full of doleful outrage. Then, the bizarre monstrosity shuddered and grew absolutely still.

It was finally dead!

Sunny couldn't help but grin slightly.

'Finally… all those coins… are mine!'

As the heavenly chain rattled and groaned, the voice of the Spell resounded above the hellish stone island. Its words sounded like music to his ears...

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Mordant Mimic.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[...You have received a Memory.]

Chapter-428: Covetous Coffer

Despite the torturous burden of the Crushing, Sunny couldn't help but feel jubilant. Not only did he receive eight shadow fragments and a powerful Memory, he had also defeated a Fallen Devil all by himself, without even Saint providing him any help.

The Black Knight, too, had been a Fallen Devil. So killing one solo meant a lot to Sunny. It was a poignant milestone that made him feel like all his hard work and all the vile things he had gone through were not for nothing. He was accomplishing his goal.

Growing stronger.

…Of course, the Mordant Mimic was not as terrifying of a foe in battle as the guardian of the ruined cathedral had been. One was a creature that seemed to have been created solely for combat, while the other mostly relied on deceit and ambushing its prey to achieve victory. And yet, the chest fiend was by no means an easy foe. If anything, its devilish nature only made it that much more dangerous.

'Argh!'

As the Twisted Rock rose higher, the Crushing struck at Sunny with even more dreadful force, making his mirth dissipate in a wave of miserable suffering. A muffled groan escaped from his lips.

'Endure… just endure a bit more… this hell is going to end soon.'

For now, he had no choice but to keep suffering, wait, and stare at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Tower.

The beautiful pagoda seemed so close now that he could almost imagine himself reaching out and encompassing it in his fist.

With nothing else to do, Sunny summoned the runes and found the

familiar cluster out of habit:

Shadow Fragments: [223/2000].

'I wonder how many coins are in that damned chest…'

Would he be able to create the third core with their help?

Shifting his gaze, Sunny found the runes describing his Memories. A new one was now shown at the end of the list.

His eyes glistened slightly as he concentrated on it and read the description:

Memory: [Covetous Coffer].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: IV.

'Huh…'

Sunny really couldn't believe his fortune. This was the second Ascended Memory of the fourth tier that he had acquired in a span of just a few days. Even without considering the main boon of the expedition — the miraculous coins — this journey had already proved to be incredibly fruitful.

But what kind of a Memory would the bizarre carnivorous chest leave behind?

Curious, he read on.

Memory Type: Tool.

'A utility Memory!'

While not as showy as armors and weapons, utility Memories were the foundation of every Awakened's arsenal. Take Sunny, for example — some of his most precious Memories were tools. Endless Spring, Ordinary Rock, Silver Bell… even Weaver's Mask.

Excited, he tried to forget about the obliterating pressure of the

Crushing and concentrate on the runes.

Memory Description: ["You are very strange!" said Noctis. Why was his new friend so deathly afraid of chests? Why was he so timid and pale? "Don't be afraid, these are just my treasure chests. They won't bite. Well...

except for this one. This one will eat you alive..."]

Sunny blinked.

'That… is interesting.'

So Noctis of the Sanctuary of Noctis was a person, after all. What's more, he or she had apparently been in possession of several treasure chests, including one that could eat people alive.

Had the Mordant Mimic once been a pet of this Noctis? If so…

What kind of a person would keep a Fallen Devil as a pet?

Suddenly full of dread, Sunny continued to read.

Memory Enchantments: [Mendacious Coffer], [Capacious Chest], [Locomotive Chiffonier], [Lurid Trunk].

Sunny stared at the runes with a deadpan expression.

'What… do all these words… even mean?'

Struggling to understand the names of the enchantments, he wondered if the Spell was having a stroke and shifted his gaze to the descriptions.

[Mendacious Coffer] Enchantment Description: "This Memory can mimic the form of any inanimate object. The size and intricacy of the simulacrum are dependent on the wielder's Soul Core capacity."

'Makes sense. I am sure that the Mimic only assumed the form of a chest, instead of being born… created?... as one. I wonder what kind of a shape I can currently manage, though.'

He studied the runes again:

[Capacious Chest] Enchantment Description: "This Memory is bigger on the inside. It can be summoned and dismissed while storing inanimate items. The size of the storage space, as well as the maximum weight of stored items, are dependent on the wielder's Soul Core capacity."

Sunny suppressed the desire to grin.

'Yes!'

This was exactly what he needed right now. This enchantment solved the exact problem he was facing — the need to carry all the gold coins away before Twisted Rock was destroyed. Once again, luck was on his side!

But that wasn't all. The ability to store items in the Covetous Coffer, and then store the Coffer in his Soul Sea, opened up a sea of possibilities. In a sense, it was just like Effie's incredible bag, but better — the bag had to be carried around if there was anything inside of it, while the Coffer could be stashed away until needed.

And if so… could Sunny bring items from the Dream Realm to the real world with its help? He couldn't wait to find out.

Thinking of all the money he would make, Sunny turned his attention to the remaining enchantments:

[Locomotive Chiffonier] Enchantment Description: [This Memory can move around and follow its wielder.]

'...Nice! That will solve the problem of having to carry all the items if I store too much inside. They are still going to weigh a ton, after all.'

[Lurid Trunk] Enchantment Description: "This Memory will protect itself against potential thieves. By eating them."

Sunny blinked.

'That is... a bit scary. I better remain on the good side of this bizarre Memory, huh?'

Overall, he was incredibly happy with the Covetous Coffer. This new utility Memory of his was simply fantastic! Not only was it capable of solving his current predicament, it would also make his future ventures into the Dream Realm much more comfortable and efficient.

Not to mention the possibility of being able to bring soul shards into the real world with its help, and selling them there at a high price…

Soul shards meant money, and money meant being able to purchase Memories. With more Memories at his disposal, Sunny would be able to bring Saint to two hundred shadow fragments faster... which would hopefully make the two of them vastly more powerful.

Now, he just had to survive the Crushing.

…He was almost ready to give up and turn into a shadow when the heavenly chain finally drew taut, stopping the rise of the Twisted Rock. One more deafening rattle rolled through the air, and then, everything grew quiet.

The Crushing was at its peak now. Sunny was hurting terribly, but still able to withstand it. He just had to endure until the island entered the descent phase, and the pressure would slowly start to reduce.

Sunny strained his chest and drew in a hoarse breath.

'Thank gods…'

However, before he could feel any relief, the whole island suddenly shuddered, and a strange piercing noise assaulted his ears.

It sounded... it sounded like the sound of metal being torn apart.

Sunny's pupils widened.

'What… was that?!'

Chapter-429: Schism

A moment later, a deafening roar of massive iron links being torn apart rolled over the entire island, which then lurched up by a few meters and suddenly came to an abrupt stop.

Sunny yelped, feeling the Crushing assault him with even more obliterating force.

'The chain… the chain is failing!'

Why did it happen so soon?

For a few moments, he felt nothing but pure, bestial panic. Then, he forced himself to regain control over his mind and threw a desperate glance toward the not-so-distant edge of the Twisted Rock.

Would he be able to escape in time?

He lingered for a moment, then gritted his teeth and commanded one of the shadows to slide off his body onto the ground.

As soon as it did, a muffled scream escaped from his lips. It felt as though a giant hammer struck his body, making every bone in it shudder and groan. Sunny turned his head to the side and spat a mouthful of blood.

'Curse it all…'

The shadow flew to the edge of the island and slid over its edge, desperately trying to reach the dying chain.

…But it was too late.

As Sunny watched in horror, one of the links of the heavenly tether broke. Only one, the weakest of them all… but that was all it took.

'No!'

The chain that connected Twisted Rock to the rest of the Chained Isles snapped in two, and as ten kilometers of gargantuan iron links slowly fell toward the Sky Below, the island suddenly shot upward. Since it was still in the ascent phase, and now unrestrained by anything, the speed of its rise was simply terrifying.

'No, no, no!'

The Crushing struck at Sunny with such fury that he couldn't even scream. He felt himself being slowly broken, and feverishly tried to come up with a solution.

'Step through the shadows… jump down and try to glide to the Shipwreck Island…'

No, that would never work. There were more than ten kilometers separating these isles from one another, which was far outside the Dark Wing's capabilities. He could try to chase after the piece of the chain still connected to the Shipwreck Island, but chances of catching up with it were close to zero.

The length of the heavenly tether was falling deceitfully slow, but it was just an illusion caused by its colossal size. In truth, the torn end of it was flying through the air at tremendous speed, moving both down and away from the Twisted Rock.

The repulsive silhouettes of the gluttonous Chain Worms were growing smaller by the second.

Sunny was already late to rush in pursuit of it, and every moment that passed made the probability of success lower.

'Great! Goddamn great, you fool! You finally let your greed kill you!'

Sunny growled, full of fury at himself, but then suddenly stopped.

No, that didn't make any sense. He was not on this island because of greed. Even though Sunny had made several risky decisions in order to get to the miraculous coins, at the end of it, standing on the edge of the Shipwreck Island, he put his avarice aside and made a sober

choice.

He came here because his intuition had told him that something on the Twisted Rock was very important to his future.

But what was it?! There was nothing but stone and bones in this damned place!

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to survive?

Sunny tried to calm down and think. He summoned his shadow back, and briefly regained the ability to breathe.

It wasn't going to be for long, though. The Crushing was already overwhelming his physical ability to resist its lethal pressure. Sunny had a few dozen seconds, at most, before he would be forced to retreat into the shadows or die.

'Think… think… there has to be a way out. Hide inside the dead Mimic or the Covetous Coffer? No, the items inside the Memory maintain their weight, which means that they, too, will be affected by the Crushing. And even if not, what's the point?

Even if the chest survives until the Twisted Rock itself is torn apart and plunges down into the Sky Below, I'll just be falling forever inside of a box instead of on my own… that's like dying inside of a coffin…'

And the Twisted Rock was going to be destroyed by the Crushing, inevitably and without a doubt. As it rose higher and higher, it was going to start to fall apart. When enough of it was destroyed to obliterate the mysterious force that kept the isles afloat, the remaining debris was going to fall down and eventually disappear into the Sky Below.

…Alongside what was going to remain of Sunny.

He lay motionlessly for a few seconds, then for a few seconds more. Another crack appeared on the corpse of the Mordant Mimic. Then, the stone beneath it cracked, too.

Sunny did not move at all.

The cracks on the stone widened and crawled in every direction.

A few moments later, a heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

Sunny had one last gamble left…

Gathering all of his strength, he groaned and pushed himself off the ground. Even though it felt as if he was lifting a mountain, and every muscle in his body trembled at the edge of bursting apart, he somehow managed to sit up.

Then, Sunny summoned Weaver's Mask.

After returning from the Forgotten Shore and deciding to create a separate persona to investigate the Sovereigns, as well as do all the things that Sunny didn't want to be associated with his name — the one which would then accidentally become known as the famous Lord Mongrel — he had decided to never use any of the equipment that it wielded if there was even the smallest chance of someone connecting him to the mysterious masked man.

But he had little choice right now.

His last hope was… fate. He knew that something had drawn him to the Twisted Rock, even though in the end he failed to find it. In the past, his intuition only reacted that strongly to the things that were connected to the gods, the Unknown… and Weaver. So, there was a high chance that Weaver's Mask would show him the way to salvation.

As the cool black wood caressed his skin, Sunny forced air into his lungs… and sent his shadow essence toward the mask.

He was going to do something that he dreaded doing for many months…

Activate the mysterious [???] enchantment of the divine Memory.

When the power of his soul poured into the Weaver's Mask, Sunny froze for a moment…

And then let out a horrible, inhuman scream.

Chapter-430: Tapestry of Fate

The moment Sunny's essence touched the black wooden surface of the divine Memory, Weaver's Mask suddenly reached into his very soul and hungrily drank more… and then more, and more, and more.

In a fraction of a second, all of his reserve of shadow essence was sucked dry, with only a tiny bit of it remaining… almost as if these pitiful drops were not even worth being consumed by the mask.

And even then, all it could achieve was activate the [???] enchantment for just a single moment.

…That single moment, however, was enough to almost drive Sunny insane.

Suddenly, a horrifying pain pierced his eyes and his mind, akin to the suffering he had experienced after consuming the Drop of Ichor, only so much worse.

Infinitely worse.

As he shrieked, all traces of intelligence disappearing from his voice, the world he saw changed.

Suddenly, all Sunny could see was an endless, beautiful eternity of twisting threads. Those threads transfixed everything in existence, connecting every living being and every object, every thought and every concept, every dream and every nightmare, stretching infinitely into every direction, as well as into the past, the present, and the future.

These were the Strings of Fate.

They were just like the threads of light that the Spell was woven of, but while the magnificent and inconceivably complex pattern that

Sunny had seen twice in the empty void between dream and reality composed the function of the Spell, what he glimpsed right now connected… everything.

All of the universe as it had existed, was existing, and was going to exist.

...Much worse, when observing the weave of the Spell, Sunny could only sense and guess at its meaning. But the terrifying enchantment of Weaver's Mask not only allowed him to see the tapestry of Fate, but also forced the understanding of it onto him.

The knowledge of everything, everywhere, all at once…

Of course, such knowledge was too much for any human to endure. Just the tiniest, infinitesimal amount of it was enough to instantly destroy any living being… except, maybe, for a god.

...Or a daemon.

As blood streamed out of Sunny's nose, eyes, and mouth, and a silent scream died on his lips, he instinctively did the only thing that could save him from being obliterated by the sight of the Strings of Fate — he dissipated into the shadows.

This was, perhaps, the reason why his eyes did not turn into smoldering embers and his head did not just explode right there on the spot. Shadows had no eyes and no skulls, after all.

However…

Falling into the embrace of darkness, Sunny realized with cold horror that Weaver's Mask, somehow, was still resting on his face. When he turned into a shadow, it had turned into one, too. His vision shifted from that of a human to the colorless sight of a shadow, but he could still see the eternity of Strings of Fate.

There were especially many of them near him. The infinite threads were tightly wrapped around his body, as well as around his soul, encompassing and piercing it… it looked almost as if he was strung on them like a small marionette.

And among those threads, two shone much brighter than the rest.

One was made out of pure white flame and stretched far away into the distance, leading north, toward the Hollow Mountains.

The other was made out of beautiful golden light, and led… down.

Down and away from both the Shipwreck Island and the Twisted Rock, diving into the Tear and disappearing into the boundless darkness of the Sky Below.

…Although it seemed as though eons had passed, in reality, it was no more than a fraction of a second.

Sunny's head did not explode because he had turned into a shadow, but his mind was still on the verge of utter, irrevocable destruction. A fraction more, and it was going to be wiped out from existence by the divine knowledge of Fate.

'But what… what can I do… the mask is a shadow now…'

His thoughts were scattered and weak. And yet, he fought through the shock and managed to remember an important detail.

He could dismiss the Memory.

But that… would be too slow. Even if it took only a second, there would be nothing left of him by the end of it.

A wave of desperation rose from the depths of his heart.

And then, the shadow essence that Weaver's Mask had absorbed finally ran out.

Instantly, the enchantment deactivated, and the ruthless worlds of endless threads disappeared with it. Sunny could only see what all humans… and shadows… were meant to be able to see.

A piece of dark stone soaring into the sky as the merciless grinder of the Crushing was slowly breaking it apart.

Sunny sensed hazily that there was something urgent about the

situation, but he was... was not entirely there.

Although the terrible visage of the Strings of Fate was gone, his mind was scattered and empty. He couldn't really lose consciousness while in the form of a shadow, but not being able to think or even recognize the existence of his self was very close to it.

Soon, however, he started to slowly gather the pieces of his wounded, shattered mind back together. He was in dire danger, after all…

The entire Twisted Rock was shaking and rumbling as it rose higher and higher into the Sky Above. Wide cracks appeared on its surface, growing larger with each second. The blackened bones had already been turned into dust, and now, the only thing standing above the stone was the ramshackle, lop-sided, dead treasure chest.

The corpse of the Mordant Mimic, strangely, seemed to be much more sturdy than the ascending island itself. It was still in one piece, at least, and almost whole.

'...I need to come up with a plan.'

As this thought formed in Sunny's mind, he suddenly came to his senses... and realized several things.

One of them was what he had to do.

The other was that the pitiful drops of shadow essence left in his soul cores were about to evaporate, which meant that he would not be able to remain in the form of a shadow for much longer.

The third one was that he still had not retrieved the golden coins from inside the chest.

...Now, whether he lived or died depended on one thing — whether he would be forced out of the shadows and turned into a bloody puddle first, or whether the Twisted Rock would fall apart first.

Which would it be?

'Well… I might as well try, right?'

Flowing through the shadow cast by the treasure chest, he dismissed the Broken Oath. A tiny amount of shadow essence, from which the Memories were created, returned to his soul. Hiding on the surface of the dead Mimic, Sunny dismissed the Blood Blossom and the Puppeteer's Shroud, too.

Finally, he dismissed Weaver's Mask, which brought him much more essence than the previous three Memories combined… even if, in the grand scheme of things, that amount was still rather insignificant.

Still, if it could gift him even one second more, it was worth it.

Circulating his essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to slow down its expenditure and enhance the speed of its regeneration, Sunny hid on the treasure chest and waited for his fate to be decided.

After something that felt like an eternity, when the Twisted Rock had soared so high above the Chained Isles that the Crushing started turning smaller pieces of stone into fine dust, the island finally shuddered... and cracked open.

One of the rifts that opened in the blackened stone was directly beneath Sunny and the dead Mimic. The whole section of the isle suddenly broke off, separating from it in a rain of rock shards. Sunny caught a glimpse of petrified bones encased in the solidified stone… and then the chest he was hiding on floated up.

For a few seconds, all of it — the remaining core of the island, the sea of stone debris, and the dead Mimic — continued to rise higher and higher. Larger pieces of rock were crushed into smaller ones, and then turned into dust. A deafening thunder filled the air.

But then, as if an invisible switch had been turned, the mysterious force that had kept the Twisted Rock floating between two skies for thousands of years was no more.

Suddenly, everything that was too heavy to be carried away by wind slowed in its ascent, froze in the air for a few moments, and fell down.

The cracked treasure chest tumbled down, too, falling toward the Sky

Below. Sunny, who was still just a shadow adhered on its side, saw the world spin around.

The last drops of his shadow essence were about to disappear.

…But that was fine. They would last him long enough to reach the altitude where the Crushing wasn't immediately lethal anymore.

When it finally happened, Sunny suddenly appeared on the surface of the chest and held onto it for dear life. The pressure of the Crushing first threw him against the wood hard enough to break a few ribs, then tried to rip him away.

But Sunny would not let go.

His damned coins were in that damned chest!

Together, he and the dead Mimic fell lower and lower, until, finally, the Crushing weakened enough to allow Sunny to move.

Summoning the Dark Wing, he commanded it to turn into a blur and changed the direction of their fall.

However, he was not trying to move toward the distant silhouette of the Shipwreck Island out of desperation.

Instead, he was guiding the chest in the opposite direction, aiming it into the vast empty expanse of the Tear.

Chapter-431: Fall From Grace

As Sunny and the treasure chest plunged through the skies into the boundless black abyss, pieces of the shattered island pursued them. The Crushing was slowly growing weaker, but it was still strong enough to kill most Awakened.

If not for the power of his shadows, Sunny would have been long dead. And even with it, he was much closer to becoming a corpse than he would have wished to be. His whole body was bruised, bloodied, and in pain.

…Which he could see very clearly, because, in addition to being terribly banged up, Sunny was also currently completely naked.

'What a… glorious sight. Damn it!'

He had dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud to absorb the shadow essence spent on its summoning, and had none of it left to manifest the armor again. The last drops had been spent to summon the Dark Wing.

As the result, Sunny found himself falling into the Sky Below atop a lop-sided treasure chest while wearing nothing but his pack and the strip of leather holding his broken arm in place. His only hope right now was that neither Master Roan nor Saint Tyris would suddenly appear to save the day and see him in this state.

He would rather plunge into the Tear than live through that embarrassment.

Well… not really.

'I take it back. Both of them can descend from the clouds and carry me away in their arms. I won't mind! No, really!'

But no one came to his rescue. Dodging the heavy slabs of shattered stone and desperately trying to glide through the field of debris, Sunny slowly pushed the chest toward the empty expanse of the Tear and prayed that nothing would damage his fragile cloak.

It was having enough trouble obeying his commands already.

The Dark Wing wasn't really designed to carry heavy weights. It could barely support just Sunny himself… and that was in normal conditions. Now that Sunny was refusing to let go of the dead Mimic, and with both of them being affected by the Crushing, the enchanted cloak was on the verge of breaking apart.

Instead of gliding smoothly away from the falling rocks, Sunny and the treasure chest were more or less just falling between them at a slight angle.

Needless to say, dodging the debris of the destroyed island in these circumstances was not easy. But, somehow, Sunny managed to protect both himself and the Dark Wing for long enough to escape the danger zone in one piece.

By then, the Crushing had become almost bearable.

Sitting on the lid of the treasure chest and feeling the terrible pressure grow weaker and weaker with each second, Sunny grimaced from pain, then let out a relieved sigh. The cool breeze was softly touching his burning face, as well as his... well, everything. All things considered, the fall was not unpleasant.

But then, a sudden thought appeared in his mind.

'...What are you feeling relieved about, idiot?'

Oh… right.

Looking down, Sunny saw nothing but the swiftly approaching, boundless dark expanse of the Sky Below.

The endless abyss that stretched downward forever, and from which there was no escape. Not unless one knew how to fly.

That was where he was headed.

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Except for the golden String of Fate Sunny had seen disappearing into the depth of the Tear, he had no reason whatsoever to believe that he would survive the fall into the Sky Below, let alone ever be able to return to the Sanctuary and the real world. Most likely, he was going to go mad and either be devoured by some terrifying abyssal titan or die of hunger.

His life, almost literally, was hanging by a thread.

…But right now, he didn't care. All he cared about was the physical relief of not being pressed down upon by the Crushing. He was still wounded all over and in pain, but experiencing just the normal amount of it was almost euphoric.

'It's the small things that matter…'

Like not being constantly crushed by an invisible, murderous magical force. Or resting comfortably on a wide lid of a treasure chest instead of having your limbs being crushed in its jaws.

…Simple stuff like that.

Now that the Crushing was almost gone, Sunny used the Dark Wing to push the dead Mimic deeper into the Tear, as well as keep it level in the air. The treasure chest was wide and long, and its lid was flat. In a sense, it was almost like a firm, narrow cot.

There were worse ways to fall into an endless abyss, really.

Sunny stared at the wide sweep of the Tear, trying to burn the memory of the golden string of light into his mind.

The Tear was situated in the center of the Chained Isles, and was both vast and absolutely empty. Some people believed that the Ivory Tower had once stood in its middle, and was the first island to break free of its chains. Over thousands of years, islands that had bordered it were slowly destroyed one after another, causing the Tear to grow.

By now, it was a couple of hundred kilometers across, and from what Sunny could tell, the String of Fate led to somewhere in its very center.

The question was… how deep in there was the thing on the other end of the String? The longest someone had flown down into the Sky Below before turning back was a week. Was the mysterious object hidden in an even deeper part of the abyss?

And what was that object?

Sunny could not even guess. The only thing he knew was that his intuition had pushed him toward the Twisted Rock because of it.

If so… it should have been something that would allow him to survive.

Right?

Of course, his fate might have been to just die there. Fate didn't really discriminate against any type of occurrence, including fatal ones. Regardless, Sunny was going to find out.

…It's not like he had a choice now.

Feeling the air get colder, he shivered and watched the sky around him grow darker and darker.

Soon, there was no light left in it at all.

Sunny had fallen into the Sky Below.

Chapter-432: First Day of Nothing

'This is… sort of grim.'

Sunny was falling through a boundless, empty void of cold darkness. Far below, false stars were shimmering with pale white light. Their radiance, however, did very little to illuminate the Sky Below. Everywhere around him, there was just… nothing.

Sunny was still resting atop the treasure chest, holding onto it with his one healthy hand. He had no reference point to measure how far he had traveled, but suspected that the distance was swiftly leaving the realm of mundane sense and logic.

He was not very educated, however, even he knew that a falling object would forever accelerate at a steady pace… theoretically. That meant that every second Sunny was falling, his speed was increasing exponentially. By now, it had to be simply insane.

But he did not really feel that speed. All he felt were wisps of cold wind caressing his skin from time to time. If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that he had accumulated a bit of shadow essence and was able to summon the Puppeteer's Shroud again. So he wasn't naked anymore, at least.

If there was one thing he did know, though, it was the approximate speed with which he could glide forward with the help of the Dark Wing. Adding the weight of the dead treasure to the equation, he could more or less calculate the distance he was covering horizontally. With that in mind, he guessed that he would reach the middle of the Tear in around a day…

Problem was, he had no reliable way to measure time, as well. There were some clues he could try to use, like the rate of shadow essence

regeneration or the state of his wounds, but they were not exactly reliable.

In heroic stories, characters often found themselves in similar situations. Every time that happened, the hero somehow managed to measure the passage of time by the state of their facial hair. Sadly, despite being eighteen, Sunny could not grow even the most pitiful of beards. That was a real shame.

'...I guess I'm not hero material.'

With a bitter sigh, he stared at the lid of the treasure chest and tried to assess his physical state.

Things weren't good, but they also weren't very bad. He had sustained minor internal damage due to the Crushing, as well as several rather ugly wounds in the battle against Mimic. The half-healed cuts left on his body by the Mirror Beast had also opened at some point, and were now hurting once again.

The worst injury was, of course, his broken arm.

His mental state was also somewhat in shambles after being ravaged by the visage of the Strings of Fate. Luckily, there seemed to be no long-lasting effects. Even the splitting headache was already growing fainter. Sunny also could not remember the exact details of what he had seen, as if his mind completely erased them from his memory to protect itself.

The only thing that remained was the fragment of the memory that he had preserved on purpose — the image of the thread of golden light leading deep into the Tear.

Sunny stared at the black nothingness, waited for a while, then slowly exhaled.

'Great. Now what?'

There was no answer.

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After a while — Sunny had no idea how long — he got tired of waiting for something to happen and decided to act.

'Might as well…'

The first thing he did was summon the Covetous Coffer.

Sunny expected that an identical chest would appear near the dead one, but instead, what he saw was a miniature version of it. A box made of dark wood, with strips of iron reinforcing it, appeared on the lid of the treasure chest.

It was about the size of a jewelry box, but not at all elegant. In fact, the Covetous Coffer looked more mean than graceful… somehow. As Sunny stared at it, the lid of the box raised slightly, revealing rows of sharp iron teeth.

He blinked.

'I guess that's all I can manage with my current Soul Core capacity.'

Shaking his head, Sunny looked at the Coffer and said in an uncertain tone:

"Come here."

Immediately, eight short iron legs appeared from under the box, and it scurried over before plopping down near him.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, glanced at his fingers, then cautiously opened the lid of the box. Luckily, it didn't try to bite them off.

Taking off his pack, Sunny transferred its contents into the box. Although it seemed rather small, the Coffer swallowed all his supplies without any problem.

'...Perfect.'

Sunny closed the box, patted it on the lid, and dismissed it.

Then, he summoned the Moonlight Shard and methodically cut his

now empty pack into strips of leather. Using his one healthy hand and his teeth, Sunny tied them into a semblance of a rope, then tied himself to the treasure chest, and finally calmed down.

Now, his coins weren't going anywhere.

Satisfied with his handiwork, Sunny rested for a bit. He was starting to feel tired… and sleepy.

Falling through the endless abyss turned out to be way less exciting than he had thought. In fact, it was extremely boring.

There were still a lot of things he had to do, though…

With a grimace, Sunny cautiously shifted his weight and crawled to the end of the chest. There, he used the Moonlight Shard to widen a crack on the side of the dead Mimic and separate two long planks of wood from it.

Then, he made a roll out of the last strip of leather he had and bit down on it.

'This... is going to suck.'

Without giving himself too much time to think about it, he removed his broken arm from its sling, and then proceeded to swiftly set the bones… just like he had been taught.

A sharp, blinding pain pierced his mind.

When Sunny regained his vision and the ability to think straight, he saw that his arm did not look like jelly anymore. It seemed more or less straight.

'That will have to do...'

Hissing and cursing, he used the two planks of wood and the strip of leather to create a sturdy splint, then carefully placed it back inside the sling. Now, his broken bones had a good chance of growing back together correctly.

Hopefully.

After that, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and the Covetous Coffer, took some of his remaining food out of it, and had a strangely relaxed meal on top of the dead Mimic's lid.

By the time he was done, the Sky Below… did not change at all.

He was still falling into its depths, slowly moving the treasure chest toward the center of the Tear with the help of the Dark Wing.

…He was also absolutely exhausted.

Sunny somberly stared at the distant false stars.

He stared at them until his eyes started to water and his thoughts became slow and muddy.

Then, he stared at them some more.

After a while, he thought:

'I can't take it anymore.'

By then, his reserves of shadow essence were full by a third. Judging that around twenty-four hours had passed after the destruction of the Twisted Rock, Sunny sighed, then dismissed the Dark Wing and allowed the chest to start falling straight down.

He was going to have to keep falling into the Sky Below for six more days... at least. Probably longer. Sunny shook his head, knowing full well that these estimations had almost nothing to do with reality.

Then, he did something that he had never thought he would ever do…

He cautiously lay down on the long lid of the dead Mimic, tightened the rope connecting them together… and closed his eyes.

Soon, Sunny was dead asleep, plummeting into the darkness of the abyss without a care in the world.

Chapter-433: More of the Same Nothing

Sunny's bed trembled slightly, and he felt the wind blowing across the room. Still mostly asleep, he sighed and tried to pull the blanket higher. However, that damned thing was nowhere to be found.

'Where the hell is it…'

Reluctant to let go of sleep, he blindly searched for the blanket. Instead of finding it, though, Sunny suddenly felt his whole bed careen to the side. Startled, he opened his eyes… and saw nothing but darkness surrounding him.

'What the?! Oh… right.'

He wasn't in his small room in the Sanctuary. He was plummeting into a lightless abyss atop the corpse of a Fallen Devil, instead.

Sunny stared into the darkness for a bit.

Then, he yawned.

'Well. At least I slept well.'

Indeed, he was feeling rather refreshed. Most of his aches had either disappeared or grown milder, and even his wounded mind felt soothed. He felt rested, energized, and much better overall.

The only problem was, he was still falling into the endless void of the Sky Below.

Sunny scratched the back of his head, thought about this predicament, then summoned the Endless Spring and drank some water. Then, he concentrated and tried to assess the situation.

...The situation was absolutely the same.

He was surrounded by nothing, nothing had changed while he slept, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Sunny sighed and stared at the treasure chest beneath him. After a while, he thought:

'If you think about it, this is just next-level pettiness. Not only did I kill this poor bastard, I even went so far as to take a nap on top of its dead body. Talk about insulting…'

Somewhere down, down below, false stars shimmered with white light.

Judging by how much of his shadow essence had regenerated, Sunny judged that he slept for about twelve hours. A bit longer than usual, but he was really exhausted after everything that had transpired.

These calculations of his, of course, were very rough. But if he assumed them to be correct, that would mean that he had left the Sanctuary six days ago.

He had no idea how long it was going to take to reach the thing on the end of the golden String of Fate, but had to assume that it would take at least a week… much longer than that, most likely.

Back in the real world, his body was safely hidden in the luxurious sleeping pod in the basement of his house. The pod would keep it alive for months, so Sunny was not too worried about his physical well-being… yet.

Would anyone miss him?

...Probably not. Kai and Effie were used to his long ventures into the Dream Realm, and even if none of them had been as long as this one was going to be, they would just assume that he was too lazy to answer their messages and go about their business. They were famous heroes now, after all, with packed schedules and plenty of problems of their own.

Teacher Julius didn't expect any reports from him, either. The

lookouts in the Sanctuary were not in the habit of keeping a detailed record of who went in and out of the Citadel. The most anyone was going to think about him would be when Cassie arrived from the Night Temple, and he wasn't there to help Saint Tyris receive her.

But she would just think that he was avoiding her, as he had done before.

Sitting on the lid of the dead treasure chest in boundless darkness, Sunny realized that no one was really going to care that he was gone. So many things had changed, but even more remained just the same.

Throwing a long look at the beautiful glass bottle in his hand, Sunny remained motionless for a while, then dismissed it and knocked on the lid of the dead Mimic.

'Whatever. I have my coins, at least!'

***

Some time later, he was performing a strange aerial dance. Holding onto the rope connecting him to the dead Mimic with his one functioning hand, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing, then cautiously climbed onto the side of the big chest and tried to balance it so that the heavy thing didn't flip.

Because of the fact that both of them were plummeting down with incredible speed, his body felt pleasantly light. Sunny thought about it for a while, then frowned.

How did that even make any sense? Yesterday, he had thought that the speed of his fall was going to increase exponentially, which meant that at some point his body was bound to be simply torn apart… probably.

But now, he realized that his assumption was wrong. Since he could breathe in the Sky Below and felt the wind — or rather, the air moving past him as he fell through it — it meant that the speed of his fall had a limit dictated by the air resistance.

He did not, however, feel that resistance too much. By all accounts, he should have been hearing the roaring of the wind and feeling it

assault his body, instead of falling through the emptiness in something that resembled comfort.

Common sense didn't seem to be working in the Sky Below.

'Better not think about it too much.'

What was the point of trying to understand the laws of a place that simply denied all logic? He had far more practical things to do.

Trusting the leather rope to hold his weight, Sunny let go of it and summoned the Moonlight Shard. Then, perched precariously on the side of the treasure chest, he inserted the narrow blade of the ghostly stiletto between its lip and the lid, and tried to pry it open.

The task turned out to be far more difficult than Sunny had anticipated. Not only did he have to do everything with only one hand, he also had to balance the chest to prevent it from spinning in the empty void… as well as keep an eye on the rope, hoping nervously that it would not break.

After some time and plenty of exasperated curses, however, he finally managed to pry the jaws of the dead devil open.

Inside its maw, a pile of golden coins was waiting for him to claim them.

A dark smile appeared on Sunny's face.

Then, he let out a shaky, slightly unhinged laugh.

"Ah! It feels nice to be rich…"

Chapter-434: Absolutely Nothing

Summoning the Covetous Coffer, he commanded the toothy box to climb inside the… bigger, toothier box and open its lid. Then, he started whistling a lighthearted melody while throwing the heavy coins inside.

'One, two, three, four… ah, what a day to be alive… five, six…'

One after another, the miraculous golden discs disappeared into the Coffer. After a while, Sunny shifted his weight slightly, got more comfortable, and continued gathering his spoils.

In the end, he had recovered almost fourteen hundred coins from inside the dead devil. Just as Sunny had expected, the entire top layer of the treasure pile had turned out to be real.

That was an incredible, astonishing boon! Suddenly, everything that had happened seemed worth it…

Almost.

Glancing at the lightless void around him, Sunny sighed.

'Who knows if I will even be able to return to the Sanctuary? Without the altar, these coins are just dead weight.'

Somewhat disheartened, he lingered for a few moments, then turned his gaze back to the opened treasure chest.

The top layer of the treasure pile that he had successfully plundered was indeed real, but beneath it…

Sunny struggled to keep the contents of his stomach inside. Beneath

the treasure, the limbs and organs of the Mimic were tightly packed together, taking up most of the chest's volume. The whole thing was soaked in black blood and producing a sickening stench, not to mention looking like a butcher's nightmare.

'Disgusting… so disgusting…'

Thinking about how repulsive the sight in front of him was, Sunny used the Moonlight Shard to cut through the terrible sludge and fished out four large soul shards with a wide smile on his face. After cleaning them up a little, he placed the alluring crystals inside the Covetous Coffer and dismissed the Memory with a feeling of great satisfaction.

After that, Sunny stared inside the treasure chest with a dubious expression on his face.

The thing was… he only had around three days worth of provisions left, stored neatly inside the Covetous Coffer. If he rationed his food, it would probably last him for about a week. After that…

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then shuddered and closed the lid of the chest with a loud thud.

'...I'll think about it when the time comes. But, hopefully, it never does!'

With that, he climbed back onto the dead devil and rested for a while, looking into the darkness.

As time slowly passed, Sunny grew more and more solemn. Finally, he came to a frightening realization.

…He had nothing else left to do.

***

"This is going to be a problem."

An eternity later — or just a few hours, who knew — Sunny was sitting on top of the treasure chest and dying from boredom.

He was still falling through the boundless dark abyss. Of course, what else would he be doing? There was nothing else to do!

The Cruel Sight was in his hand, the silver blade shining with a bright radiance. He was using its [Light Eater] enchantment to summon the sunlight the somber spear had absorbed and project it into the darkness of the Sky Below. Thanks to that light, the shapes of his two shadows could be clearly seen, one resting on the surface of the chest to his left, the other to his right.

Sunny shook his head, then said:

"I am dying of boredom here. I have never been this bored. How are we going to survive weeks of this crap? What do you guys think?"

The happy shadow to his right hesitated, then raised a fist encouragingly. Its sentiment was quite clear:

"You got this!"

The gloomy shadow to his left stared at him grimly, then simply shook its head. Its meaning was clear, too…

"Just give up already…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"Well, I think it's going to be fine. I'll just… think about it as a vacation. Yeah. When was the last time I could just relax and do nothing? That's right… never! If you think about it, guys, this is a godsend opportunity.

An opportunity to rest and laze about as much as I want."

He remained silent for a while, then added:

"I literally have no choice but to do nothing. Lucky me, right?"

The gloomy shadow glanced at him, then covered its face with a palm.

Even the happy shadow hesitated for a bit before giving him a timid

shrug.

Sunny frowned.

"What do you mean, go crazy? I am not going to go crazy! I'm so done with being crazy. Been there, done that, as they say. There is zero possibility that I will go crazy."

The shadows didn't answer, making him huff angrily.

"Whatever! Why am I even speaking to you two? It's not like you even have enough decency to pull your weight in the conversation!"

He scowled and dismissed the Cruel Sight, letting the darkness shroud everything once again. The shadows became invisible.

After a while, Sunny said scornfully:

"And it's not like I don't have better alternatives to talk to, anyway."

…Where had he put the Ordinary Rock?

***

By the time three days had passed — at least Sunny suspected that it had been three days, since that was how long his shadow essence usually took to fully recover without the aid of the Soul Serpent — he was, indeed, on the verge of losing his mind.

It wasn't even the boredom that was the worst, it was the absolute lack of any external stimuli.

Nothing ever changed in the Sky Below. Nothing ever happened. Nothing ever appeared, or disappeared, or was there at all. There was nothing but empty darkness, the distant shimmering stars, and him.

And falling.

At the start of it all, Sunny had been worried that he would encounter evil, colossal, inconceivably horrifying creatures in the abyss. That was what one would expect from an abyss, right? But there was none.

By now, he almost hoped to encounter a stray titan or two.

He had heard that people were prone to going insane in isolation, but never expected to be in such a situation himself.

Sunny had spent the first day thinking about this and that, remembering his experiences and trying to learn something from them.

He wondered about the Mirror Beast and the Cruel Sight. Why was the silver spear even called that? Then, he understood.

It was called the Cruel Sight because its polished blade showed a person their own reflection.

He wondered about the shipwreck, the coins, the Mimic, and the person called Noctis. How were all of these things connected?

After a while, he guessed that Noctis had been the captain of the ancient ship, the master of the Mimic, and the person whose face was depicted on the miraculous coins. Noctis was also probably the one who had created the coins, in the first place.

That's why they could only be used in his Sanctuary.

He wondered about what Kai, Effie, and Cassie were doing.

He wondered about Nephis.

On the second day, he summoned the runes and saw that she had become a devil. Sunny stared at the counter that showed [2/4000] with a deadpan expression, then sighed and dove into the Soul Sea.

There, he had studied all of his Memories and the shadows of all the creatures he had killed.

That only took him a couple of hours.

...Or an eternity.

On the third day, Sunny just lay on the lid of the dead mimic and stared into the void. His mind was starting to behave in strange ways.

Although there was nothing around him, Sunny could sometimes see strange shapes and silhouettes in the darkness, as well as hear distant noises.

He wanted to think that they were real, but knew that it was just the result of prolonged sensory starvation. Human minds were weird that way… they couldn't really withstand a lot of nothing.

Suddenly, the story of a man who had to turn back after seven days of descending into the Sky Below out of fear of going insane made much more sense to him.

To make himself perceive at least something, Sunny summoned the Silver Bell and rang it in the darkness, listening to the melodious ringing as it disappeared into the abyss.

And now, he was sitting on the treasure chest, looking at the distant stars, and speaking with the Ordinary Rock.

"So, how has your day been, Rock?"

The Memory answered in his own voice:

"Same old nothing. Yours?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, then said:

"I am enjoying my vacation."

The Ordinary Rock laughed.

"Sounds wonderful! How is your vacation going?"

He sighed.

"Splendidly. I've yet to hit the rock bottom."

For a while, there was nothing but silence. Then, a new question came:

"...Why is it so dark?"

Sunny smiled weakly.

"Why wouldn't it be dark? This is the Sky Below, after all!"

But then, he froze.

'...What?'

The voice that asked the question… had not come from the Ordinary Rock.

That voice was not his own.

Chapter-435: Listening to Nothing

Sunny shuddered.

The voice he heard… was not his own. It sounded pleasant and calm, and seemed to have come from the darkness of the Sky Below itself.

'...Have I finally lost it?'

His first thought was that he had gone crazy again and was now hearing things.

His second thought was much less comforting…

'Damnation!'

Had he summoned some unholy titan from the depths of the Sky Below, after all?!

Sunny outstretched one hand, ready to manifest the Cruel Sight, but then hesitated.

If the owner of the voice was not a figment of his imagination, but some harrowing being of the void, was it really wise to agitate it? Would the silver blade even do anything against it?

'Calm down. Calm down. Maybe you just imagined the whole thing…'

As if to answer his thoughts, the void laughed softly.

"Ah, my apologies. I seem to have startled you."

Sunny gulped.

The pleasant voice seemed to belong to a young man, but no matter

how hard he looked into the darkness, he couldn't see anyone… or anything… nearby.

He was reminded of his first meeting with Kai, only this time... this time, things were much more frightening.

"N—no worries. I just… didn't expect to hear another human's voice here. You, uh… you are a human… right?"

The void was silent for a while, then answered in a neutral tone:

"A human? I used to be a human once, I guess."

Sunny realized that he couldn't even pinpoint the direction from which the voice was coming. It was just… there, somehow. Everywhere. Around him...

He tensed, then asked cautiously:

"Used to? Then what are you now?"

The voice disappeared for a few moments, then sighed. Finally, it answered:

"...Lost."

Sunny blinked.

'What the hell does he mean?'

"Lost? As in lost in the Sky Below?"

The darkness let out a sad laugh.

"...No. Not in the Sky Below."

As Sunny felt cold shivers run down his spine, it hesitantly added:

"I am sorry. I haven't spoken to anyone in a long, long time. Instead of lost, it would be more proper to say that I am one of the Lost. My body in the waking world was destroyed, but my soul continues to exist here, in the Dream Realm. I hope that explanation is more clear."

One of the Lost…

Sunny knew of these people, although he had never met one in person. Just like there were Hollow — people whose souls were destroyed, leaving an empty body behind — there were also the Lost. People whose bodies had somehow died in the real world, leaving their souls stranded in the Dream Realm.

There wasn't a lot of them, since most of the time the soul perished shortly after the body had, but there were some.

Knowing that the owner of the voice was one of these lost souls made Sunny relax a little… not that he had any reason to believe that the stranger was telling him the truth. He could have been a Nightmare Creature, still.

Or something worse...

But even if he was Lost, that didn't explain how they were able to converse. The Lost, from what Sunny knew, were just like any other Awakened in the Dream Realm. It was just that they couldn't return to the real world.

What they certainly were not were disembodied voices coming from the void.

He shifted his weight slightly, ready to… do something to protect himself, if need be, and asked:

"Sorry to hear that. But how is it that I am able to hear your voice, but can't see you?"

The voice lingered for some time, then answered with a bit of amusement:

"That is a good question."

Sunny waited patiently for him to expand on that answer, but that seemed to be it. A bit irritated, he said:

"Well? Aren't you going to explain?"

Instead, the voice suddenly asked:

"Why are you descending into the Sky Below? This is a very dangerous place."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then coughed.

"Ah, that… well, you see… I am not so much descending into the Sky Below as I am falling into it. I got stuck on an island because of the Crushing, and sadly, that island broke off its chain. So, I had to jump off. And here I am."

Then, he frowned.

"Wait… dangerous place? Why is it dangerous? I haven't seen anything dangerous anywhere in this dreadful pit!"

The voice lingered for a while, then sighed with regret.

"You'll see. When you reach the stars… then you will see."

Then, it disappeared.

Sunny stared into the darkness, a bit disturbed. A deep frown appeared on his face.

"What do you mean? What will happen when I reach the stars?"

But there was no answer.

No matter how long Sunny waited, the voice did not speak to him again. The void was silent and empty, just as it had been before.

In the end, he just massaged his temples and cursed.

"What the hell was that?!"

Did he imagine the whole thing? Had his mind finally cracked?

Sunny stared at the Ordinary Rock, as though expecting it to actually talk and corroborate his story. Sadly, the Memory could only repeat the sounds it had recently heard…

'Wait… the sounds it had heard!'

Sunny hurriedly commanded the Rock to repeat everything it had recorded in the past few minutes. Then, feeling cold sweat appear on his forehead, he listened to his own voice speaking to nothing. His words were repeated, but where the words of the strange voice should have been, there was nothing but silence.

Dismissing the Ordinary Rock, Sunny clutched his hair and groaned.

"Crazy… I've gone completely crazy… curse it all, it has been just four days, and am already turning back into a lunatic!"

Not even a full week passed by, and he was already going insane.

"This is the worst vacation ever!"

After a while, he frowned.

Despite being mostly sure that the whole thing was just a symptom of his sanity slowly breaking apart, Sunny cautiously crawled to the edge of the chest and looked down, at the distant shimmering stars.

..Was he imagining things, or did they seem to be a little closer?

Chapter-436: Nothing to Worry About

After the conversation with the disembodied voice of the void — whether it was real or not — Sunny felt different. Not exactly better, but at least not as lost and unmoored as before.

'That would be really ironic if the voice was just a figment of my imagination, wouldn't it?'

The empty void around him didn't seem as empty anymore. Even if it was now full of potential danger, the danger was better than nothing.

…Anything was better than nothing. After four days spent in the endless silence of the dark abyss, Sunny realized just how terrible nothingness was. The human mind was simply not built to withstand it.

In any case, he wasted some time staring at the distant stars, and then got to thinking.

Now that his cores were once again full of essence, he had no tool left to measure time. After considering his options for a while, he summoned the Cruel Sight and activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment.

Even though he had no enemies to fight in the Sky Below, simply keeping the enchantment active was going to drain his shadow essence. Sunny felt that he could keep it going for about two hours straight.

After his reserve of Essence became approximately half-empty, he dismissed the Cruel Sight and sat cross-legged in the center of the dead devil's lid.

Plummeting through the lightless void, Sunny inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Then, he concentrated on the flow of essence through his body, feeling it permeate every fiber of his being.

Directing it into the coils of the Soul Serpent, he felt its flow accelerate and widen.

By using the Shadow, he was going to replenish all of the spent essence in about a day. That was going to be his clock from now on.

Sunny exhaled, directed the shadow essence into his left hand, and concentrated it in his thumb, then in his index finger…

Thanks to the Soul Serpent, his control of the essence was better than that of most Awakened. However, it was still rather crude. Sunny innately knew how to enhance his physical attributes by expending it, but wasn't really efficient with how he did it.

To him, it was a matter of instinct — he just thought about making his hand stronger, and the essence flowed like a torrent to achieve the desired effect.

That was how all young Awakened used it.

True masters, however, were much more intricate in their control of essence. They could isolate every muscle, every nerve, every bone in their body and only enhance those parts of it that they needed to perform an action. Their expenditure of essence was more akin to a trickle than a torrent, but achieved the same result.

That's why between two Awakened with similar soul core capacity, one could be able to fight at his peak physical prowess for much longer.

…Now that Sunny had nothing else to do, he decided to really work on this aspect of mastery over his own body and soul. He had practiced essence control before, of course, but between the constant need to hunt down Nightmare Creatures and the fact that Soul Serpent served as an effective replacement for months of training, not as much as he could and should have.

Directing the flow of essence into his right hand, Sunny sighed and

thought:

'Vacation is over.'

***

Two more days passed… or rather, two cycles of spending shadow essence with the help of the Cruel Sight and then waiting for it to regenerate, which Sunny had decided to count as days.

He spent that time meditating as he controlled the flow of the essence through his body, sleeping, and feeling hungry.

Now that Sunny was rationing his food, the feeling of hunger that he had forgotten ever since becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell returned. Even then, his supplies were on the verge of running out.

He only had enough for two meager meals left. After that, Sunny was either going to have to starve, or consider opening the treasure chest again and gnawing on the dead devil's raw meat.

Both possibilities seemed rather bleak.

What he was more concerned about, however, were the shimmering fake stars of the Sky Below.

Now, he was more or less sure that they were slowly growing larger. If not for the conversation with the voice of the void, he would have never noticed the subtle change.

But after being alerted to their importance and spending a lot of time observing the stars, he had become convinced that the voice — whether it was one of the Lost, a Nightmare Creature pretending to be human, or simply a manifestation of his damaged psyche — had been right.

He was slowly drawing closer to the stars burning in the deepest reaches of the abyss.

If only the voice had told him why, exactly, the stars were dangerous…

Luckily, on the seventh day of his plummeting through the Sky Below, the voice returned.

Sunny was grimly eating his second to last piece of food and staring into the darkness, feeling his mind teetering on the verge of madness, when the voice resounded from the void again:

"...What a curious creature you are."

'Oh, thank the gods!'

Sunny choked on a piece of dried meat, took a sip of water from the Endless Spring to chase it down, and glanced at the empty expanse of the Sky Below with a dark expression.

"Where the hell have you been?!"

The voice remained silent for a bit, then answered apologetically:

"Talking like this is draining for me. I was recovering."

Sunny frowned, trying to glean some information about the nature of the owner of the pleasant voice from this statement, but then gave up. He had too few clues to guess.

"Well… if you are about to disappear for a few days again, at least tell me what's the deal with these stars first. Why are they so dangerous?"

The void hesitated:

"You don't know?"

Sunny blinked.

"Of course, I don't know! Why would I ask if I knew?"

When the void answered in a few moments, it sounded slightly surprised:

"Well. Those lights are not really stars. They are actually remnant conflagrations of the divine flame."

Sunny thought about what he just heard, then tilted his head to the side.

"Divine… flame? What? Why would divine flame burn in the depths of the Sky Below?"

The voice chuckled. Then, it said with a bit of amusement:

"How do you think the Sky Below came to be? A long time ago, this was a beautiful and prosperous land, you know."

The amusement drained from its voice, replaced with something much darker.

"But then, its prideful ruler provoked the wrath of the Lord of Light. The Lord… ah, you probably only know him as Sun God… brought down his heavenly flame upon the lands, shattering the earth and burying an unquenchable fire beneath it."

The void grew silent, and then sighed.

"Over the ages, that fire devoured everything — the earth, the land, even reality itself. All that is left is this empty abyss, and the remnant fragments of the divine flame still burning deep below. So, I am sorry to say this… but unless you know a way to survive the searing heat of the all-destroying heavenly fire, you will probably burn to death in a few weeks."

Chapter-437: Nothing, Nothing, Nothing

Sunny sat silently for a few moments, thinking.

'Sun God…'

So, the ruler of this land had angered the gods, and one of them struck down their kingdom. He could just imagine it — a vast pillar of incandescent white flame falling from the skies, piercing the ground and causing the whole region to fracture, its fragments falling into the searing inferno of the divine flame one after another.

Well… not all of them had fallen.

He glanced up, wondering if the Chained Isles were created to save the citizens of the destroyed kingdom from annihilation. If so… that prideful ruler must have been not so simple themself.

Who would be powerful enough to dare resist the wrath of the gods?

And what had that being done to provoke it?

But more importantly…

How the hell did the voice of the void know so much about it?

A subtly suspicious expression appeared on his face.

"...Really? This is very interesting. And how exactly do you know all this?"

Sunny hesitated, and then cautiously added:

"Did you, perhaps, have something to do with that prideful ruler?"

The voice was silent for a moment, and then suddenly exploded with sincere laughter.

"Oh my! I wish! Wouldn't that be grand… but no, I am just an Awakened who had studied the Chained Isles, probably the same way that you have studied them in your travels. The ruins here are all but destroyed by the endless cycle of the Crushing, but if one knows where to look, there are still some answers left to find."

Sunny smiled.

"True. But I am actually a research assistant for the Wilderness Survival faculty of the Academy, and yet I have never seen any of the information you possess in the database. With the level of access that I have, that is very strange, isn't it?"

The voice chuckled.

"How am I supposed to report my findings to the Academy? I can't even leave the Dream Realm."

Sunny blinked.

That… actually made a lot of sense. Sort of. Lost or not, an Awakened still had to survive somehow in the Dream Realm, so they were bound to live in one of the Citadels. Probably. So, it wasn't like they had no contact at all with the real world, even if it was only through the other inhabitants of their Citadel.

Unless the owner of the voice was not a usual Lost. Or was lying to Sunny...

Or was just a figment of his imagination.

He frowned.

"...By the way, where are you, exactly? I haven't heard a voice like yours anywhere in the Sanctuary. And I have spoken to most of the Awakened there at least once."

The voice lingered for a while, then answered:

"I am not in the Sanctuary."

What was that supposed to mean? There was another Citadel on the Chained Isles, the Night Temple. But only those serving Valor were allowed to anchor there. Well… excluding Cassie and her cohort.

Did the owner of the voice have something to do with the great clan Valor? Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Are you from the Night Temple, then?"

…But there was no response.

It seemed that the mysterious young man Sunny had been speaking with — if he was even real — had once again reached his limit, thus ending their conversation.

Sunny sighed.

"I swear to gods, this is even more annoying than when Effie leaves me on read!"

Who knew that a voice of the void could be more irritating than someone who had been almost literally raised by wild wolves?

"No manners! No decorum..."

***

Soon, Sunny regretted not asking the voice necessary questions. He would have to be more strategic with his words in the future...

"Survive heavenly fire… survive heavenly fire…"

Sunny glanced at the stars and felt that they had drawn even closer.

How was he supposed to withstand the searing heat of the divine flame?

Could that flame burn shadows?

He didn't really have an answer, but felt that it would be at least damaging to him, even in his shadow form.

And then, there was a more looming problem. The voice said that it would take Sunny a few weeks to reach the layer of the abyss containing the false stars, which meant that he was going to be… very, very hungry by the time he did.

Humans could survive a surprising amount of time without any food, but it would take a heavy toll on his body. Sunny had no idea what he was going to find on the other end of the golden String of Fate, but doubted that it would be a warm welcome.

He had to be ready to confront danger, and becoming starved and weak was not really an option.

Sunny lingered for a while, then stared down, at the lid of the treasure chest.

Was he really going to have to eat… that?

Even his shadows seemed disgusted by the idea.

But hey… food was food.

'Right?'

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer, took his last meal out, and looked at it with regret.

"Tonight… we feast!"

'...Tomorrow, we mourn. And barf. Probably.'

***

A few days later, the stars were visibly brighter than they had been before. The sight of the black void littered with shimmering lights would have been beautiful if not for the terrible danger they represented.

Sunny was sitting in the center of the plummeting treasure chest with an extremely miserable expression on his face. It was deathly pale, and his chin was covered with drying black blood.

Raising a piece of raw devil meat to his mouth, he tore a piece of it with his teeth, and forced himself to chew.

'Disgusting… this is so disgusting… who knew I would miss the taste of synthpaste one day? Maybe I should just starve, after all!'

As soon as he thought that, the void suddenly spoke again:

"Oh, gods! You are actually eating that!"

Sunny stared into the darkness with hatred, swallowed the piece of mimic meat, and said evenly:

"Sure. Want a bite?"

The voice hesitated for several seconds, then asked:

"You're eating it raw?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Of course I am eating it raw, you fool! How else am I supposed to eat it? I don't exactly have a kitchen here!"

Then, with a furious determination, he tore another piece of meat and chewed on it. As it turned out, his face had not reached its maximum paleness before. Now, it seemed not only white, but also a little green.

The void sighed. Then, it asked curiously:

"Are you not afraid of poisoning yourself?"

Sunny snarled.

"...I have a strong stomach."

He had, indeed, considered the possibility of catching a severe case of food poisoning from eating the corrupted meat of the vile devil. As an Awakened, however, his digestive system was much stronger than that of mundane humans. And on top of that, there was Blood Weave. So, he judged that his chances of dying from eating the mimic were

rather low.

…No matter how poetic it would have been. Choking to death on the flesh of a devil you killed would be, too...

'How funny.'

Sunny swallowed the disgusting meat and took a sip from the Endless Spring.

A few moments later, the voice asked:

"Have you thought of a way to survive the divine flames?"

He stared at his broken arm, then shrugged.

"I considered a few."

The voice seemed to be pleased to hear that.

"Good. I have thought about it, as well…"

Chapter-438: Prince of Nothing

Sunny stared into the void suspiciously.

"Yeah? And how come you are so concerned about my well-being?"

The voice remained silent for a bit, then answered wistfully:

"I haven't really spoken to anyone in a long, long time. It would be a shame to finally find someone to talk to, only for them to die soon. Don't you think?"

'That guy is definitely not just a simple Lost… what is his deal, really? Is he actually a human or only pretends to be one?'

Sunny thought for a bit, then said:

"I guess. And since we're on the topic… how is it exactly that we are able to talk?"

He expected the voice to change the subject or ignore the question, but to his surprise, it actually answered:

"I am not really sure. This has never happened to me before, either."

After a while, it added hesitantly:

"Have you… have you perhaps found a piece of a broken mirror somewhere?"

Something clicked in Sunny's mind.

"Broken mirror… Mirror Beast… Beastie…"

The Ascended Reflection! The shard of a mirror that the strange creature had left behind was still inside the Covetous Coffer… smeared with his blood…

'Crap!'

So the owner of the voice was the creator of the murderous Reflection Sunny had encountered on the Reckoning. That… that gave him as many questions as it had given him answers.

He couldn't really think about it right now, though, because the pressure of the Flaw was already building in his mind, forcing him to speak.

"Now that you mention it, I did, indeed, recently find a piece of a broken mirror. With the word "Beastie" written on it in a child's handwriting."

The voice remained silent for a while, then asked quietly:

"Oh? How exactly did you find it?"

Sunny did not answer for as long as he could, then reluctantly spoke:

"That mirror shard was left behind by a powerful creature I killed. I took it with me, thinking that it might turn out to be important."

This time, the voice was quiet for an especially long amount of time. When it finally spoke, there was a hint of anguish in it. The owner of the voice tried very hard to suppress it, but his pain seemed to be too deep to not seep into his words even slightly.

"...So it's dead. I see."

Then, it fell silent once again.

Sunny tensed. After a while, he asked carefully:

"You, uh… you're not going to be angry with me for killing your pet, are you?"

A deep sigh resounded from the void.

"Angry… with you? Why would I be angry with you? You are not to blame for what happened to us."

Sunny shivered, suspecting that whoever or whatever it was that had been responsible for the Mirror Beast becoming separated from its creator — and eventually dying by his hand — was extremely lucky that the owner of the voice had become one of the Lost.

Then, he asked cautiously:

"What… what exactly was it, though? I have never seen a creature like that."

The voice seemed more in control of itself when it answered after a few long moments:

"A manifestation of my Aspect Ability. A kind of an Echo, you can say. I… I created him when I was just a lonely kid. We were together for a long time, before… before we weren't anymore."

Sunny tilted his head, then frowned slightly.

"What do you mean, a kid? A kid with an Aspect Ability?"

The voice laughed bitterly.

"Ah, that… I had my First Nightmare when I was twelve. It's rare, but does happen sometimes. Few children survive the trial, though."

Sunny blinked.

'Being sent into the Nightmare at twelve… of course very few survive!'

He did know that, in extremely rare cases, the people infected by the Spell were outside of the usual age range. The entire first generation of the Awakened had been, for example. And there were cases of this anomaly to this day, even though it usually happened to someone older than the norm, not someone younger.

'And I thought that I was unlucky…'

He cleared his throat, then said awkwardly:

"Well… I am sorry for your loss. If it makes you feel any better, the

creature tried to say something before it died. Uh… we never stopped searching. Something like that."

The voice, however, didn't respond. It seemed that its owner had once again spent all of his soul essence… or whatever it was that allowed him to communicate with Sunny… and was now gone for another few days.

Sunny sighed.

"Curse it! I didn't even have time to ask him how to survive the damned stars!"

More strategic with how he chose his words, damn it!

***

Sunny spent a few more days plummeting into the void. By now, he was having trouble remembering what it even felt like, to not be falling. The darkness seemed to be eternal and everpresent, as though he had always been here, in its empty embrace, and all of his actual life was just a strange dream.

'Maybe it was?'

No... no, it wasn't. He was almost sure.

By the time the voice returned, the void had changed slightly. Not only were the distant shimmering lights now closer and brighter, but it also felt as if the air was getting warmer.

Sunny was in his usual spot, sitting cross-legged in the center of the treasure chest and training to better control the flow of shadow essence. On the surface of the lid near him was a dark longbow and a quiver of black arrows.

"...You practice archery?"

Sunny opened his eyes and glanced into the darkness, then shrugged.

"Not really. But I hope to learn a bit of it soon."

He made a grimace and nodded toward his broken arm:

"I do need two functioning hands before I'll be able to, though."

The bow and the quiver of arrows were the same he had entrusted to Saint before. Both of the Memories were Ascended, but only of the first tier. The bow's enchantments made it incredibly strong and sturdy, while the only enchantment that the arrows possessed was that they came as a whole quiver instead of a single one.

His broken arm, meanwhile, was healing. He could already move his fingers, but the process was far from over. He was halfway there, though.

Sunny healed much faster than mundane humans, and even other Awakened. He was sure that in another week or so, he would be able to take off the splint and draw the black bow.

The voice lingered, then said:

"We had no time to discuss the divine flames last time."

Sunny nodded.

"Indeed."

Then, he remembered something and asked:

"Oh, by the way… what do I call you? Do you have a name? It's a bit awkward to keep thinking of you simply as the Voice."

The voice laughed.

"A name? I used to have a name, I guess."

Sunny sighed.

"Yeah? Well, what is it?"

The void lingered for a while, then answered with amusement:

"...Mordret. Or, rather... Prince Mordret, I guess."

Sunny opened and close his mouth a couple of times, then asked with suspicion in his voice:

"Prince? What are you the prince of?"

Mordret laughed.

"Nothing! I am a Prince of Nothing. Nothing at all…"

Chapter-439: Do or Die

Sunny stared into the darkness with an incredulous expression, then shrugged:

"Sure. Whatever. Nice to make your acquaintance… Your Highness. I am called Sunless, by the way. Sadly, no title."

Silently, though, he thought:

'...The young prince that the Dreamspawn had taken away?'

Oblivious to his suspicions, Mordret hesitated, then asked politely:

"Sunless? What an unusual name."

Sunny grimaced.

"Yes. My mother had a… on second thought, forget that! Are you going to tell me about the divine flame or not?"

The Prince of Nothing was silent for a bit, then said:

"There is not much to tell. The heat of those flames is absolutely deadly. Unless you have some way to fly, you are in big trouble. Which, I assume, you don't… otherwise, you wouldn't be in this predicament, to begin with. Right?"

'Well… you can't argue with sound logic, I guess!'

Sunny sighed.

"...I can control the direction of the fall, but yes, no true flight."

He hesitated, then added reluctantly:

"For what it is worth, my Aspect Ability allows me to turn

incorporeal, as well as teleport for short distances."

He didn't really want to share the details of his powers with the mysterious prince, but currently, there was no other choice. Mordret obviously knew more about the Sky Below than Sunny, so his advice was vital.

The lost prince thought for a few moments, then said:

"Turning incorporeal will help against being cooked by the heat, but it won't save you from the divine flame itself. However, not everything is lost. Even though you can't fly, you do have some mobility. With some luck, you might be able to dodge the conflagrations."

Sunny glanced into the darkness with a resentful expression.

"That I already figured out myself. Tell me something that I don't know, genius."

The void chuckled.

"Fine. But only because you asked nicely…"

Then, it disappeared.

Sunny's face twitched.

"Goddammit! He's gone again!"

But a second later, Mordret's voice suddenly resounded from the darkness:

"No, no. There is still time. I was just thinking…"

He was quiet for a few moments, then said hesitantly:

"There is actually a path through the divine flame. An empty rift in the tapestry of stars where none of it remains. If you find it, you might survive."

Although it was hard to control his emotions these days, Sunny tried

his hardest to suppress the misplaced anger and calm himself down. When he spoke, his voice sounded almost even:

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? How far am I from this rift, then?"

Mordret sighed.

"How would I know? It's not like I know where you are, exactly. More than that, I had never managed to find the rift myself. The Sky Below is vast and deadly, after all…"

'...So, he was exploring this abyss, too. Why? What's out there, beyond the fake stars?'

Sunny tilted his head, the asked cautiously:

"If you never found it, how do you know that it's there?"

The void remained silent for some time. After a while, when Mordret spoke again, his voice sounded distant and weak:

"The Tear… it should be somewhere near the Tear. I think…"

With that, Sunny felt that he was alone in the darkness again. This time, the mysterious prince was truly gone.

He sat motionlessly for a while, staring into the endless nothingness of the Sky Below.

"Near the Tear…"

The String of Fate, too, had pointed toward the Tear. To somewhere very near its center. If the rift in the annihilating field of the divine flames had anything to do with the golden thread, then Sunny had a much better chance of finding the path through the merciless stars than Mordret had ever had.

…He had already half-found it, really.

Looking down, Sunny sighed and closed his eyes again, returning to the endless routine of circulating the shadow essence through his body.

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Day passed after day.

The closer Sunny drew to the obliterating stars, the calmer he became. Now that mortal danger was getting near, his mind had no time and reason to slowly destroy itself. The absolute nothingness of the void that had assaulted it, too, was much less empty now.

Not only was it full of threat, but also of heat and light.

And shadows…

Sunny had dismissed the leather elements of the Puppeteer's Shroud and undid the bands of its upper garment. Stripped to the waist, he meditated in the darkness, the Soul Serpent coiling around his pale and lithe body.

Because of the rough diet of only eating the poisonous meat of a dead devil, he had practically no fat left. His skin looked a bit feverish and was drawn tautly across his lean muscles, making for a sight that was both splendid and a little disturbing.

His broken arm had almost healed, so he removed the splint and spent some time every day doing simple exercises to bring it back to its former strength. He had to be cautious not to overexert it too soon, though.

The plan of how to survive the field of stars was slowly forming in his mind. It was bound to be a gamble one way or another, but Sunny was not going to give up without doing everything he could to survive.

…His confidence was somewhat reinforced by the fact that he had, most likely, discovered the rift that Mordred told him about.

Following the direction of the golden String of Fate that had been practically burned into his mind, Sunny studied a particular cluster of the stars for an entire week before finally noticing something that looked like a tiny, almost imperceptibly minuscule gap in the vast tapestry of countless shimmering lights.

Trusting his judgment, he summoned the Dark Wing and used it to push the treasure chest toward that particular cluster. Luckily, he was already not too far away from it… most likely because he had been aiming to follow the golden string from the very beginning of his fall.

As a few more days went by and the stars grew even larger, Sunny became more or less certain that the tiny gap was, indeed, there. It had grown slightly bigger, too.

What he was uncertain about, however, was his ability to reach the rift without being incinerated by the annihilating heat of the divine flame.

The field of false stars was vast, and the rift was tiny in comparison. At the speed that he was falling, missing it would be far too easy.

But what choice did he have?

'Do or die...'

Well... when had it ever been any different?

Chapter-440: Merciless Stars

After more than three weeks of falling into the Sky Below — at least Sunny thought that it had been that long — he sighed and stood up, balancing on the dangerously swaying treasure chest.

His hair was wet with sweat, and his skin glistened in the piercing white light of approaching stars. By now, they did not resemble white dots in the boundless darkness of the abyss. Instead, each was the size of a fist, surrounded by a furious, blinding halo.

The heat permeating the void was suffocating.

Sunny stared down, at the ocean of white flames beneath him. If this was what remained of the inferno of heavenly fire after thousands of years of burning in an empty void… he shuddered to imagine what it must have looked like right after the hammer of divine punishment had fallen on the ancient land.

His gaze was locked on a small empty space between several radiant stars.

The rift.

This was his goal.

As Sunny stared darkly at the tiny patch of emptiness amid the vast field of flame, the void suddenly spoke:

"Have you… huh? Is that a… uh… what a large tattoo you have."

Sunny glanced at the darkness, then shrugged.

"What about it?"

Mordret lingered for a few moments, as though not sure what to say, then asked with amusement:

"Sunless… are you sure that you are a research assistant?"

Sunny grinned.

"Of course I am! Do you know how many contribution points they give me every month? I scribbled a few words about this and that, and that bought me a house. An entire house! Maybe being a researcher is not as swell as being a prince, but it's still a sweet gig… with all due respect, of course. Your Highness."

The void laughed.

"You are such an interesting person."

Sunny stared into the void with an incredulous expression.

"You are a bit of an enigma yourself, are you not?"

Mordret remained silent for a bit, then asked:

"Are you ready for what is about to come?"

Instead of answering, Sunny pointed to the ocean of merciless stars.

"Look there."

When the lost prince spoke, his voice was strangely regretful:

"I can't really see that well. What is it?"

'Oh… right.'

Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, then said:

"I think I found the rift you told me about."

Mordret asked with surprise in his voice:

"...Really? You found it?"

Sunny shrugged.

"We'll see. You said that it should be somewhere under the Tear,

right? Since I fell right into the Tear, there's a chance that I'm right."

The void lingered, then said in a somber tone:

"What if you're not?"

Sunny smiled.

"Then it has been nice knowing you. Anyway… anything else you want to tell me before you go? I doubt that we'll have the opportunity to speak again before I reach the stars."

Mordret thought for a few seconds, then said:

"I might not be able to reach you at all after that. So… good luck?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

The voice of the void answered after a long pause:

"Yes. Why?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing, really. I just thought that you are stuck somewhere out there, beyond the stars."

Mordret chuckled.

"...No. I am stuck somewhere else."

His voice grew strangely distant. Then, an almost inaudible whisper reached Sunny's ears:

"I hope… survive… Sunless…"

Then, the lost prince was gone, leaving Sunny alone in the darkness once again.

He sighed.

"Me too. I hope I'll survive, too."

***

After Mordret disappeared, Sunny waited for a bit, and then broke the rule he had set for himself for a second time since starting this expedition — he summoned another Memory that should have been tied only to Mongrel.

The Mantle of the Underworld.

The intricate onyx armor weaved itself from sparks of darkness and covered him from head to toe. Sunny was not accustomed to wearing its closed helmet, since he was usually using Weaver's Mask instead, but it was not uncomfortable. His field of vision, however, became slightly constricted.

'Hopefully, no one will be able to see me this far into the abyss.'

Out here in the Sky Below, he felt as though no one, not even those who were attuned to revelations, could peer into his secrets and glean anything about them.

…The only exception to the rule was the Prince of Nothing himself. But he was gone now.

The Mantle possessed two enchantments that would most likely prove themselves to be extremely helpful soon. The [Stalwart] trait of the armor imbued it with high resistance against various types of elemental damage, including fire. Just seconds after donning it, Sunny felt the suffocating heat retreat, replaced by a pleasant coolness.

How long would that coolness last, he did not know.

The [Living Stone] enchantment, on the other hand, allowed the Mantle of the Underworld to repair itself while being worn. This trait would come into play later, helping Sunny protect himself even after the divine flame became intense enough to damage the onyx armor.

After that, Sunny summoned the dark longbow and the quiver of black arrows. By now, his hand had recovered enough for him to be

able to draw the mighty bow… he just hoped that he would not need to.

Finally, he summoned the Cruel Sight and attached it to his belt.

…All preparations were now done.

Looking down through the narrow slit of the visor, Sunny sighed…

Now, everything depended on his resilience, luck… and how deep his reserves of shadow essence were.

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In the stark darkness of the empty void, deeper than even the memories of a blue sky could reach, a cracked treasure chest was plummeting toward an ocean of searing white flames.

Its underside was bathed in the furious light, while its lid was drowning in the deepest of shadows. Wisps of smoke were slowly rising from its smoldering wood, and the strips of iron reinforcing it were slowly starting to glow as they turned orange.

Sunny, who had become a shadow and was once again hiding on the lid of the dead devil, felt fine… for now. Until the treasure chest was destroyed, he was protected from directly touching the light of the divine flame.

But how long would the corpse of the mimic last?

He was thinking about something else, though… something far more dreadful.

'The rift… the damned rift! I am going to miss it!'

Chapter-441: Ocean of Flame

Sunny almost managed to direct his endless fall toward the tiny gap between the remnant conflagrations of the divine flame, but on that incredible scale, even the smallest mistake was bound to take him many kilometers away from the goal.

…A mistake that he had inevitably made, since there were no lessons on navigating eternal voids, especially without any tools except for his own two eyes.

'Damn it!'

Right below him, swiftly approaching, was an ocean of obliterating light, heat, and fire.

The conflagrations themselves were rather small, no larger than a dozen meters in diameter, and chaotically scattered in the void at a considerable distance from one another. Each looked like a furious, undulant orb of dancing white flames.

The space between them, though, was not safe. It was permeated by immolating heat that nothing could withstand… at least nothing Sunny had at his disposal.

As the adamantine wood of the treasure chest started to slowly catch fire, he hesitated, then glanced at the empty darkness of the distant rift in the ocean of light. Whether by accident or by design, there was a point in the field of false stars where no conflagrations remained. A roughly circular breach was torn through them, promising him safe passage.

But how was he supposed to reach it?

If Sunny jumped off the plummeting chest right now, he would probably be able to glide all the way to the rift… the distance was

just right. However, he was pretty sure that the Dark Wing would be instantly turned to ash by the terrible heat of the remnant vestiges of the divine flame.

Not to mention that he himself would probably get thoroughly cooked inside the Mantle of the Underworld if he remained corporeal for that long.

With a mental sigh, Sunny left the comforting embrace of the shadows.

A kneeling figure in an intricate onyx armor appeared on the lid of the smoldering treasure chest.

'Argh…'

Despite the protection of the [Stalwart] enchantment, the air he breathed in was thin and scoldingly hot. It almost felt as if he was inhaling fire. Other than that, however, the Mantle of the Underworld did a good job of keeping the heat at bay... and yet, Sunny could feel it starting to slowly get warmer. He didn't have a lot of time.

Standing up, he raised the dark longbow, nocked an arrow on its string, and gritted his teeth. Then, sending a thin trickle of essence into the muscles of his shoulder and back, he strained his body and drew the mighty bow.

…It felt as though he was lifting a mountain.

'...How the hell does Saint make it look easy?'

Feeling his muscles tremble, Sunny aimed toward the rift and hesitated for a second. After he did this, there would be no going back.

'What is there to go back to, fool? Aren't you sick of that damned chest?!'

Relaxing his hand, he let go of the string.

The black arrow shot into the darkness with incredible speed, instantly becoming illuminated by a blinding radiance. It was

strange… the void was full of light now, but with nothing to reflect it, the Sky Below still appeared black and empty. Only when something entered the emptiness did the light become visible.

Sunny felt the chest sway, and struggled to keep his balance.

A couple of moments later, the fletching of the arrow suddenly caught fire and burned away. However, that didn't affect its flight too much. The arrow pierced the darkness and turned into a distant spark, covering almost an entire kilometer in just a few seconds. Then, however, it slowed down considerably, and its wooden shaft began to smolder.

It was time to move.

As Sunny felt flame licking his greaves, he held his breath… and used Shadow Step.

The arrow he had sent flying in the direction of the rift was wrapped into one of his shadows. As the shadow unfurled itself from the igniting shaft, Sunny shot out of it as if launched from a giant slingshot. As soon as he left the shadow, it instantly wrapped itself around his body, and then slid toward the quiver.

'Crap!'

Sunny found himself flying through the darkness with nothing to support or shield him from being directly exposed to the immolating radiance. The Mantle of the Underworld suddenly shone in the torrent of light, instantly growing considerably warmer. It wasn't burning his skin yet, but he suspected that there was not much time left before that happened.

Especially because his momentum was not only horizontal, but also vertical, and was becoming more so with each moment. He was still plummeting toward the ocean of flames, approaching it with terrifying speed.

The closer he got, the more obliterating the heat would become.

Twisting as he fell to orient himself in the void, Sunny nocked another arrow and drew the bow again. This time, it was

considerably harder, since he had nothing to stand on and had to rely solely on the strength of his arms and shoulders.

Just in the few seconds it had taken him to draw the bow, the heat became much more destructive.

Another arrow flew into the darkness, and several seconds later, he used Shadow Step again, appearing almost two kilometers closer to the rift.

…It was still decently far away, though.

'Curses!'

Sunny flew through the obliterating darkness and struggled to nock another arrow. The glossy black surface of the Mantle of the Underworld was starting to glow, slowly turning incandescent. He was still fine inside, though. For now. If a little hot…

Another arrow disappeared into the darkness, and Sunny jumped through the shadows again.

This time, the jump devoured pretty much all of his remaining shadow essence. Whatever little there was left would not have been enough to repeat the process the fourth time.

However, maybe… just maybe… he wasn't going to have to.

After using Shadow Step three times in a row, and turning some of his vertical momentum into horizontal one with each jump, Sunny was now plummeting diagonally through the void, seemingly toward the very edge of the rift.

'I am going to make it… am I going to make it?'

Even if he would, it was going to be very, very close.

The string of the bow suddenly caught fire and broke with a loud ring. Dismissing the bow and the quiver, Sunny sent both of his shadows to reinforce the Mantle of the Underworld and threw his hands and legs to the sides. He was trying to create as much surface area as possible to utilize the resistance of the air in his favor.

He was well-versed in all kinds of falling and gliding thanks to using the Dark Wing so often, so this was not something new to him. Granted, he had never done it in a heavy armor.

Speaking of which…

Sunny hesitated, then directed some of his remaining essence into the Mantle of the Underworld to activate the [Feather of Truth] enchantment and make the armor as light as possible.

Then, all he could do was endure the growing heat and wait and watch as both the obliterating ocean of flames and the circle of saving darkness approached him at tremendous speed.

His life now depended solely on which of the two was going to swallow him first.

Chapter-442: Burning Heaven

Surrounded by a radiant halo, Sunny plummeted into the darkness. His breath was ragged and hoarse, and his eyes were blinded by the piercing shine of the immolating ocean of white flames beneath him.

Fearing that his eyes would be permanently blinded by it, he closed them, which helped a little.

'Hot… it's so hot…'

He was drawing closer and closer to the remains of the divine inferno, and as he did, the stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld was growing hotter and hotter. Soon, its outer layer turned bright red. Then, it started to melt.

'Damn!'

Sunny directed more of his remaining essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent, activating the [Living Stone] enchantment of the Underworld armor.

As the onyx melted and cracked, causing him excruciating pain, the Mantle began to repair itself. Before anything could fully breach the surface of the incandescent onyx, the damage was undone.

…For now, the enchanted armor could heal itself faster than it was being destroyed. In large part due to being augmented by both of his shadows, perhaps.

Sunny encountered another problem, though.

It was getting harder and harder to breathe… not even because the air was scalding and hot, but because there was not enough of it.

Fire fed on oxygen, after all.

Luckily, Sunny was no stranger to being deprived of it. What's more, thanks to the Blood Weave, he could get by without breathing for much longer than most Awakened… and he suspected that he would have to do just that very soon.

Hopefully, he would be able to reach the rift shortly after that.

And speaking of the rift…

He carefully opened his eyes a little and glanced into the blinding inferno beneath, trying to judge whether or not he was going to make it. For now, it seemed that he would easily pass the field of fire and enter the dark emptiness… but that was just an illusion.

Sunny had to factor in that his forward momentum was constantly growing weaker, which meant that his trajectory would become more and more vertical the longer he fell through the searing abyss.

It was too hard to tell whether or not he was going to make it.

Gritting his teeth, he shifted his weight and lowered one hand, grabbing the hilt of the Cruel Sight. Then, he raised the silver blade to his chest, threw a cursory glance at his warped reflection, and activated the [Light Eater] enchantment of the somber sword.

Instantly, the mirror blade began to absorb the merciless light of the false stars, growing white-hot and incandescent. Sunny, however, found himself able to see once again. He even felt a little cooler, although it might have been just wishful thinking.

Surrounded by a strange bubble of darkness left behind by the devoured light, Sunny plummeted toward the obliterating stars.

'Almost! I'm almost there!'

By then, the conflagrations of the divine flame were so close that it seemed as though he could reach out and touch them. No matter how hard Sunny tried, he couldn't draw in even a little bit of air into his lungs. The rift was so close…

But in the end, it turned out to be just a little bit too far.

Sunny reached the very edge of the field of flames. He only had to fly past one last cluster of conflagrations. However, his fall took him straight into the embrace of fire instead.

Sunny would have screamed if there was any air in his lungs. Moving at a terrible speed, he pierced right through one of the seething orbs and emerged from the other side of it, wreathed in white flame. A terrible pain enveloped his whole being.

But it wasn't physical pain… it was the similar kind of pain he had experienced while using the Broken Oath, only magnified a hundredfold.

'...shadows... my shadows!'

His shadows were wrapped around the Mantle of the Underworld, and so, they had been badly damaged by the divine fire. The armor itself had caught aflame and was now quickly disintegrating. The fire was spreading, too, threatening to envelop him whole.

Half-blind from pain, Sunny did the only thing that could save him now — he dismissed the onyx armor. The Mantle of the Underworld fell into countless sparks of darkness, which then disappeared, causing the fire to be extinguished.

Naked and hurting, Sunny fell into the darkness and saw the Cruel Sight crack, the silver of its blade becoming dull and tarnished. Following an instinct, he activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment, and then dismissed that Memory, too.

Finally, he wrapped the wounded shadows around himself and circulated what little shadow essence he had left through his entire body, spending all of it to make himself more resilient…

And then, he felt cool wind touch his blistering skin.

Sunny fought through the terrible pain and opened his eyes.

Behind him, there was a wall of ruthless radiance.

But in front of him, there was nothing but darkness.

…He had reached the rift.

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'Hurts… everything hurts. Crap… this is so unfair!'

Sunny flew deeper into the rift, creating more distance between himself and the conflagrations of the divine flame. Of course, they were too close for him to feel comfortable. But at least he could breathe again, and wasn't being cooked alive.

Well… at least not very fast.

Before being badly hurt by the divine flame, Sunny had hoped that somehow, miraculously, he would turn out to be immune to it. He was technically a shadow of a Sun God's descendant, after all. Why wouldn't he be immune to the manifestation of his master's domain?

Well… his master's indirect ancestor's domain, to be precise.

Plus, he was not just any shadow, but a divine one left behind by Shadow God himself. Light and shadows were two sides of the same coin, weren't they?

As it turned out, the divine flame didn't care.

'Argh!'

Currently, Sunny was falling through the rift. He had reached its center and dove straight down, hoping to stay as far away from the surrounding stars as possible. It was as though there was a tunnel of empty darkness torn through the very heart of the field of flames, and he was following it down.

Down, down, down…

It was hard to even conceive of a world where he wasn't constantly falling down.

Now that he had no Mantle of the Underworld to protect him from the blaze, Sunny was suffering a lot. Rift or not, the air was still permeated by the unbearable heat. His skin was red, with patches of

it blistering. Some of it was badly burned by his unfortunate clash with the divine flame and because he had not dismissed the burning Mantle of the Underworld fast enough.

It was not life-threatening, though.

…Yet.

'Come on! End, goddammit!'

But the field of flames showed no signs of ever ending.

Until it did.

After a while, when Sunny was on the verge of losing conscience from the constant heat, he noticed that the scattering of the immolating stars around him became a bit thinner.

And then, even more so.

And then, suddenly and without any warning, he fell out of the field of divine flame and found himself surrounded by nothing but blessed nothing once again.

…The radiant inferno was now above him, growing further away with each second. It looked as if…

As if heaven was on fire.

And beneath him…

Sunny looked down and shivered.

'What... how?'

His eyes widened in shock.

Chapter-443: Secrets of the Void

Out there in the empty darkness of the void… something even darker loomed, hidden from the radiant light of the ocean of flame above.

Sunny peered at the distant black silhouette and shivered.

'...What the hell? What is it doing here?'

Far below him, a small island cut from dark stone floated in the endless emptiness, surrounded by drifting slabs of shattered obsidian. A tall and magnificent pagoda stood in its center, built of a flawlessly black material that was neither wood nor stone. Its lusterless walls seemed to devour any light that touched them…

It was the perfect replica of the Ivory Tower... but at the same time its opposite. The two pagodas were so alike that for a moment, Sunny even thought that he had somehow found himself high up in the Sky Above.

But no.

The island that the Obsidian Tower stood upon was different. It was larger than the one every Awakened on the Chained Isles was used to observing in the skies, and had no broken chains hanging from its stone slopes. On its desolate surface, remains of mysterious structures could be seen, turned to ruin by the passage of time.

Several obsidian pillars protruded horizontally from its edges, stretching into the empty void like strange wharves.

From high above, Sunny couldn't see much of the island in detail. But he was approaching it fast…

'...Crap!'

Too fast!

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then suppressed the desire to immediately summon the Dark Wing. The divine flames were still too close, and their heat could damage the fragile Memory. He had to wait for a bit… there was still time.

Even if it was going to run out pretty soon.

Sunny continued to fall, waiting. With every minute, the heat of the immolating stars dissipated a little. And with each minute, the dark island grew closer and closer.

Finally, knowing that there was no more time to waste, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and commanded it to turn his fall into a glide. The dragonfly cloak turned into a blur behind his back… but it also began to produce thin wisps of smoke, threatening to catch aflame at any moment.

'Curses!'

Supported by the enchantment of the Dark Wing, Sunny's descent started to slow down little by little. His speed, however, was too great to be nullified in a single instant. It was dropping swiftly… but was it swift enough to prevent him from splattering all over the surface of the mysterious island?

And was the transparent cloak even going to endure for long enough?

Sunny cursed and trembled as he watched the Obsidian Tower approach.

'Here goes nothing! Damn!'

In the end, he still landed with enough speed to potentially shatter all bones in his legs from the impact against the ground. At the last moment, however, Sunny turned into a shadow and dove into the deep darkness enveloping the island instead. Safely embraced by the shadows, he submerged himself into them, and finally allowed his mind to relax.

'Safe… I'm safe…'

…He was finally safe.

For a few seconds, at least.

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Sunny was in a world of pain.

His shadow essence was running out, too.

Also, he had no idea what terrifying danger was waiting for him on the mysterious island that remained hidden in the deepest reaches of the Sky Below for thousands of years, nor what deadly secrets waited for him inside the Obsidian Tower.

…But for now, he did not care. All he cared about was that he was not falling anymore.

'Bliss… this is pure bliss!'

Floating in the dark embrace of shadows, Sunny couldn't get enough of the fact that, for the first time in almost a month, he was… stationary. He finally had solid ground under his feet again! Metaphorically speaking, of course.

In any case, it was such a beautiful feeling.

Sunny allowed himself to relax and rested for a bit, safely hidden in the deep dark shadows.

After a while, he sighed and forced himself to turn his attention to the outside world. Moving closer to the surface of the deep darkness that embraced him, Sunny cautiously took a look outside.

'...Huh?'

Strangely, what met him was complete and utter silence.

There were no Nightmare Creatures on the island, no abyssal horrors, no terrifying beings to devour him whole. Not even a single unholy titan slumbered nearby, ready to wake up at the slightest disturbance.

The island seemed… empty.

Which was very fortunate, considering that Sunny was running very low on shadow essence and was going to have to assume his physical form soon.

He hesitated for a few moments, then took stock of his equipment and himself.

His soul was seriously wounded, but not beyond its ability to heal itself… in time.

His body was not exactly whole, but in somewhat of a splendid shape, considering all that had happened. He even had all his limbs intact.

Both the Mantle of the Underworld and the Cruel Sight, as well as the Dark Wing and Saint's bow were heavily damaged. Luckily, none of these Memories were completely destroyed. It was going to take a long time before he could use them again, though. Days… maybe even weeks.

On the bright side, Saint herself had recovered from the wounds received on the Shipwreck Island ages ago. Sunny actually could have summoned her at any point during his journey through the Sky Below, but there was no real reason to. Plus, the treasure chest would not have accommodated both of them, especially considering how much the living statue weighed.

The [Dark Mirror] enchantment of the Cruel Sight now also had two elemental augmentations for Sunny to choose from. Its runes showed:

Current Charge: Divine Flame.

Latent Charges: Soul.

'Divine flame, huh…'

Well, if there was one benefit from being burned by the damn thing, it was that now he would be able to cause similar pain to others. So, it was totally worth it in the end... no doubt about it...

'I guess we will have to see.'

And lastly… Sunny was now completely sure that the thing on the other end of the golden String of Fate was the Obsidian Tower. His intuition was calm and silent. That told him that he had arrived at his destination.

Somewhere inside, a thing that was deeply connected to his fate waited.

Glancing at the magnificent silhouette of the black pagoda, Sunny sighed… and left the safety of the shadows, emerging from them to step onto the surface of the island that no other human had visited in thousands of years.

If ever…

Chapter-444: Obsidian Tower

Sunny stood naked on the rocky surface of the dark island. He grimaced and looked at his body, which was a map of burns — some more severe than others — then summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Not wishing for the soft fabric to touch the worst of his wounds, he left it the way it had been during the latter stages of his journey through the Sky Below, with the leather elements gone and the upper garment undone and tied around his waist.

This time, his body was wrapped in shadows and appeared black, as if cut from the same obsidian that the dark island consisted of. The coils of the Soul Serpent seemed to shimmer as the essence flowed through them.

A moment later, Saint stepped from behind him and moved forward, summoning the Midnight Shard as she walked. Knowing how badly his soul was damaged, Sunny decided to keep the Broken Oath locked away for a while, so the Shadow was not surrounded by the destructive aura anymore.

He was also not in any shape to fight himself, at least not very effectively, and that was why the austere tachi was currently in the hands of the taciturn demon. If push came to shove, Sunny would either use the Moonlight Shard or command the Soul Serpent to assume the odachi form.

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the Endless Spring and greedily drank the cold water from it, then leaned forward and poured some on his head. After that, he finally felt like a human once again.

…All in all, things weren't that bad. He was alive and in one piece, suffering from neither thirst nor hunger.

Here on the dark island, the air was pleasantly warm. Bright stars

burned in the empty void high above, making for a beautiful view. Right in front of them, the graceful silhouette of the Obsidian Tower rose from the ground like a black rift in reality.

It turned out to be much larger than Sunny had thought, but nowhere near the scale of the Crimson Spire. That cursed thing seemed to be too gargantuan to even exist, while the ancient pagoda was more or less fit to have been built for humans. Well… maybe for extremely tall humans. Or... tiny giants?

As Sunny studied the Obsidian Tower, Saint tilted her head and stared at the black pagoda, too, her ruby eyes reflecting some strange emotion. Was it… recognition?

Why would his Shadow recognize a tower hidden in the depths of the abyss below the Chained Islands?

'Strange…'

Sunny frowned, then dismissed the Endless Spring. He remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly headed toward the tall pagoda. Saint followed.

As they walked across the island, Sunny had time to look at the various ruins left on its surface.

It was hard to determine what they had been once, but Sunny got the feeling that he wasn't looking at the remains of buildings. More like… structures? Devices? Their purpose was now impossible to determine, but whatever it had been, he doubted that anyone could have ever lived inside.

The closest he could get to putting his feeling in words was that these ruins reminded him most of the bowels of the underground factory his mom had worked in when he was little. Even though the factory was much larger and built of alloy instead of cut blocks of obsidian, not to mention being much more advanced, the sensation was the same.

'...Just what was the purpose of this island? Who lived here? Who built that strange tower?'

The closer Sunny got to the Obsidian Tower, the more he was impressed by its graceful beauty. Even though the pagoda was hidden in the depths of the Sky Below, where very few creatures would have ever seen it, the unknown builder spent time to ensure that it replicated the magnificence of its Ivory counterpart perfectly.

It would have been breathtaking if it wasn't so… menacing.

Surrounded by nothing but emptiness and silence, the Obsidian Tower appeared ominous just by virtue of existing.

'I am not… not scared at all.'

He was, however, thinking about one thing in particular…

Which tower was really the replica, and which one was the original?

The beautiful white pagoda that flowed high above the Chained Isles, or the menacing black one that hid in the darkness below?

Maybe he was going to find out…

Soon, Sunny and Saint approached the tall gates of the Obsidian Tower. Nothing attacked them, and no frightening sound came from inside, announcing that something that dwelled beyond the black gates was awakening in hunger. The pagoda was silent, just like the rest of the dark island.

The strange thing, though, was that Sunny could not feel any shadows on the other side of the massive door. Not because there weren't any, but because the walls of the tower seemed to shield the interior from his Shadow Sense.

A cold shiver ran down his spine.

'I have never encountered anything like this before. Have I?'

He hesitated, then approached the black door, summoned the Moonlight Shard, and scratched its surface. A layer of black dust fell down, revealing a much harder, and even blacker surface beneath.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

'...Soot?'

The entire pagoda was covered in a thick layer of soot. He stood motionlessly for a bit, trying to understand what meaning was there in this fact, then simply shrugged and studied the ancient gate.

The problem he was facing… was that the gate didn't have a handle to open. Neither did it have a keyhole, a bell to ring, or a knocker to announce his arrival.

'How the hell am I supposed to open it?'

Without Shadow Sense, he couldn't use Shadow Step to simply appear inside. So, for the moment, Sunny was stuck.

'It would be very, very funny to travel all this way only to find out that I can't open a damn door. Right?'

Slightly embarrassed, he looked at Saint and asked:

"Any ideas?"

He didn't really expect an answer from the taciturn demon, but to his surprise, the Shadow stared at him for a few moments, and then lowered her sword.

Then, she raised one hand and pointed to her eye.

Sunny observed all of that in complete bewilderment, then blinked a couple of times.

'Eye? What does she mean?'

Then, an idea came into his mind.

Turning back to the door, he put one hand on it, and then shifted his gaze in a similar manner he did when looking beneath the surface of Memories to look at their spellweave.

And there, beneath the obsidian surface of the tower's gate, he saw it.

A weave.

It wasn't the weave of ethereal threads he was used to seeing, though. Instead, it was a much cruder and more primitive version of it, created from very physical diamond strings that stretched beneath the stone surface, creating a beautiful, but simple pattern.

Sunny had only seen this type of weave one time before.

Inside Saint herself.

Back when she was just an Echo, he had noticed it hidden behind the radiant pattern of the spellweave. He had thought that it was what made the stone warriors alive, in the first place.

That it was created by the last child of the Unknown in the cavernous halls of his dark domain…

And that it might have been the precursor of the Spell itself, or maybe an imitation of it.

Was this tower built by the Lord of the Underworld too, then?

…Sunny hesitated for a moment, then moved his hand to a particularly bright node of the diamond weave and sent a small amount of shadow essence into it.

For a moment, nothing happened.

And then, the gates of the Obsidian Tower opened.

Chapter-445: Respite

Visible only to Sunny, the diamond weave beneath the surface of the gate ignited with ghostly light. Almost immediately, a thin vertical crack appeared in the ancient stone.

Then, the gates silently opened, and a gust of wind hit Sunny in the back.

He took a few steps away, hiding behind Saint, and cautiously looked over her shoulder at the dark entrance.

Nothing was moving in the darkness. From what he could see, the interior of the Obsidian Tower seemed quite mundane. As soon as the gate opened, his Shadows Sense could finally penetrate the invisible barrier surrounding the graceful pagoda — it didn't detect any danger, as well.

It really did seem safe.

He waited for a few moments, then coughed and waved a hand in front of his face, trying to get the soot that had flown into the air away from it.

"Ah, well. Nothing to worry about, then. Let's go!"

Sunny glanced at Saint, lingered for a second, and added in a polite tone:

"...Oh, ladies first."

The taciturn demon turned her head slightly, stared at him with one ruby eye, then simply walked forward and stepped over the threshold of the ancient tower. Sunny waited for a few moments, and followed.

Tightly gripping the handle of the Moonlight Shard, he dove into the

darkness that reigned behind the tall frame of the entrance, took a dozen steps forward, and found himself in a wide corridor that seemed to encircle the entire first level of the pagoda.

The corridor stretched both far to the left and to the right. Here and there, Sunny could see large doors leading to differently sized rooms that were situated in the direction of the tower's outer wall, all the way to the bends of the corridor. And right in front of him was an intricate wooden gate decorated with beautiful engravings.

Behind it was the central hall of the tower.

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then pushed the wooden gate, which opened easily and revealed a vast chamber on the other side.

'That smell…'

His eyes widened.

Behind the gate was a large hall with a very tall ceiling. As soon as the gate opened, glass lanterns ignited on its walls, filling the interior of the Obsidian Tower with ghostly blue light. There were various things in the hall, all of which demanded Sunny's attention.

There was a stand holding smith's tools and implements, all masterfully crafted from black obsidian and silver. A badly burned worktable with a scattering of beautiful soul crystals on its black surface. A stone wall with mysterious schematics cut into it, the cuts themselves so smooth and deep that he couldn't even begin to imagine what had left them behind, let alone what the schematics described.

There were strange devices forged from silver and black steel, some of which reminded him of astronomical instruments, but also very mundane things, like chairs, tables, and even something that resembled a very long bed.

All of it was perfectly preserved and immaculate, with not a speck of dust anywhere, cleaner than even his own house in the real world was… despite the thousands of years that must have passed since the Obsidian Tower was visited last.

It also all felt slightly… wrong. The sizes of everything were almost fit to be used by a human, but slightly different. The shapes of the handles of all the tools were slightly strange. The way the pieces of furniture and equipment were arranged in space filled him with a slight feeling of unease, even though he didn't know why.

…But Sunny didn't dwell on this for too long. Neither did his gaze linger on any of these items. His attention was pulled toward one specific place.

Not too far from him stood a simple wooden table. And on it… was all kinds of delicious food.

Juicy meat, freshly baked bread, succulent grapes, glass jars of exquisite wine, beautiful pots full of steaming tea, all of it waited for him, as if served only a few seconds ago.

Sunny's mouth watered.

'How is this possible? This has to be an illusion… right?'

Covered in layers of soot, sweat, and blood, he walked toward the table. His boots left black marks on the pristine floor of the hall. Arriving at his destination, Sunny reached out and grabbed a piece of bread with his dirty hand and greedily devoured it, then took one of the intricate silver goblets and filled it with wine.

The rest of the goblets clattered to the floor, thrown off the table by his careless movement.

Not paying it any attention, Sunny gulped down the sweet wine and laughed, sending breadcrumbs flying into the air.

"Ah… this is not bad, really…"

He would have preferred something without alcohol, but then again, this wine tasted so good...

There was a wide grin on Sunny's face, but also dirty traces left by tears. His shoulders trembled.

"This really hits the spot…"

He was aware of the fact that the food could have been full of poison, but didn't care too much. He was just too hungry, tired, and spent. His body and his soul both hurt too much. He was at his wits' end.

Refilling his goblet and grabbing a piece of perfectly roasted meat, he wandered away from the table and took another look at the large hall.

"There's no one here, right, Saint?"

The Shadow silently walked behind him, vigilantly looking around and keeping the Midnight Shard ready.

But there was nothing to use it against.

Sunny wandered for a minute or so, and eventually stopped near a large bed covered with black, lavish furs. Dropping the empty goblet on the floor, he hesitated a little… and then climbed into the furs.

'...Who's been sleeping in my bed?'

Sunny dismissed the Puppeteer's Shroud and lowered his heavy head onto a soft pillow.

He wanted to give Saint the command to stand guard, but there was no need. The taciturn demon was already doing exactly that…

Before Sunny could think about something else, the exhaustion of the past few weeks took over his mind, and, offering almost no resistance, it slipped easily into the embrace of darkness.

The first thing Sunny ended up doing after discovering the Obsidian Tower and finding his way inside… was falling on a bed and going to sleep.

He slept well.

Chapter-446: Relentless Destroyer

Sunny slept for a long time, the exhaustion slowly leaving his battered body. After a while, though, his consciousness rose from the deepest layers of slumber, summoned back by pain and thirst. With a sigh, he turned to his other side and tried to go back to sleep. After a few more hours of tossing and turning, though, Sunny was finally awoken by the loud sound of something crashing to the floor.

'...What is Saint doing?'

He reluctantly opened his eyes and sat up.

As Sunny's weight shifted, the bed beneath him suddenly broke with a loud crack. He rolled onto the floor with a startled yelp.

"Huh?!"

Standing up, Sunny looked at the broken bed, then at the hall of the Obsidian Tower, which was now submerged in darkness. A bewildered expression appeared on his face.

The room he had entered before had gone through a dramatic transformation while he was asleep. The magical lanterns were now extinguished, and everything inside seemed dilapidated and decrepit, almost on the verge of crumbling to pieces.

The magnificent tools and implements had rusted through and deformed, the worktable had collapsed under its own weight — that was the sound which had awoken Sunny — the food he had enjoyed yesterday had turned to dust. The pristine condition of the hall was gone, and now it was full of darkness, debris, and dirt.

It was as though eons had passed since he fell asleep.

A cold feeling appeared in his chest.

'...Have I slept for a thousand years?!'

Remembering fairy tales where similar things often happened, Sunny felt a hint of horror, but then thought about it for a few moments and calmed down.

No, he had not… judging by how much shadow essence had accumulated in his cores, he slept for about twenty-four hours straight, which was a lot, but nowhere near a thousand years. Saint, who was keeping watch nearby, also didn't look as if she had been guarding him for a few centuries.

Instead, it was the pagoda itself that had aged. As if an invisible seal that had kept it untouched by the passage of time for all those thousands of years was now broken, and time was finally catching up with it.

Time was the most relentless destroyer, after all.

Sunny sighed with relief, then grimaced.

'Curses! I should have eaten more yesterday… much, much more!'

All that delicious food, wasted!

Shaking his head dejectedly, Sunny looked around, then assessed his own state.

His wounds were already much better than they had been the day before. The burns were still rather painful, but within his capacity to endure without being slowed down in battle… too much. A couple more days of rest, and he would be close to being fully functional again.

He was really hungry, though.

But that was going to have to wait.

Summoning the Moonlight Shard, Sunny gave Saint a command to follow, and went to explore the Obsidian Tower.

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It took Sunny about an hour to fully explore the first level of the ancient pagoda. Some of the doors in the outer corridor had collapsed and turned to dust, some remained standing and required him to use a tiny bit of shadow essence to unlock them.

Behind the doors were all kinds of rooms. Most of them were empty, suggesting that the master of the tower had moved away a long time ago, taking all the valuable things with him, while some contained weathered debris and dust. Sunny spent a lot of time trying to understand what all these things had once been, but the damage done by the accelerated time was too extensive to even guess.

'...Such a shame.'

Feeling strangely disappointed, Sunny decided that it was time to move on to other levels of the tower. He still had to find the thing that had pulled him toward this place, as well as — hopefully — some means of returning either to the Chained Isles or to the real world.

The idea of being stuck on this island forever did not seem very appealing.

Especially now that there was no food anywhere around...

Not finding anything interesting on the first level, Sunny decided to explore further.

From the outside, it had seemed as though the Obsidian Tower had six levels, which really surprised Sunny. He had expected there to be seven. However, after finding two stairwells — one stair leading up, the other down — he realized that there was an underground level, too, which explained this small discrepancy.

Everything having to do with the Spell and the Dream Realm had a tendency to be tied to the number seven… except the gods, of whom there had been only six.

'I guess that's why they are called gods… no law can bind them. Not even such a weird and random law as all things coming in sevens.'

Sunny looked up, then looked down, and decided to explore the underground level first.

Letting Saint go ahead, he entered the spiraling staircase and descended into the depths of the dark island.

Unlike the ground level, the basement of the Obsidian Tower turned out to be one giant hall.

And in it…

Sunny recoiled.

For a second, it seemed as though hundreds of dismembered corpses were piled at the center of the hall, forming a morbid hill. But as Sunny took a step back and instinctively raised the Moonlight Shard, he realized that he made a mistake.

The bodies piled in the center of the chamber were not that of people. Instead, they were… dolls.

Hundreds of broken porcelain dolls, each the size of a human, were discarded in the underground hall. Their fragile bodies were shattered and broken, laying there like abandoned toys. Some were missing limbs, some were left with gaping holes in their torsos. Some had long ago turned into piles of small fragments, with not even their faces remaining.

But those faces that did remain…

Sunny tilted his head, then glanced at Saint.

Every broken doll had the same face, or rather, all of their faces looked alike… as if they were all imperfect copies of the same original.

They had the same flawless, inhumanly beautiful features that Saint had, only the craftsmanship behind the faces of the broken dolls seemed much less refined, as though the sculptor had not yet perfected his skill when creating them.

There all looked like Saint's lesser siblings.

...If Sunny ever had doubts that the Obsidian Tower had once belonged to a certain Underworld Demon, now there were none. The last child of the Unknown had clearly spent some time here. Was probably the one who had created the black pagoda, in the first place, for some mysterious purpose Sunny couldn't even begin to guess.

Then, however, his attention was drawn to something else.

The floor of the vast hall was covered by a thick layer of dust, which should not have been disturbed in a few thousand years.

…But it had been.

A set of fleet footprints led all the way from the bottom of the stairs, where Sunny was standing, to the pile of broken dolls, circled it, and then mysteriously disappeared.

Sunny stared at it for a few moments, surprised.

'Someone… someone had entered the Obsidian tower before me."

Chapter-447: Primal Fear

Sunny stared at the footprints for some more, then frowned.

'How does this make any sense?'

The Obsidian Tower had been sealed before he opened its gates. After he did so, the magic that had preserved everything inside was dispelled, which meant that those doors had not been opened in thousands of years.

It wasn't that easy to gain entry into the pagoda, to begin with. Not even mentioning the fact that one had to travel through the Sky Below and find the only rift in the boundless ocean of divine flames, there was also the fact that the gate had to be open by pouring essence into the weave of diamond strings beneath its surface.

Sunny could only see the weave and understand its meaning a little because his eyes had been transformed by the drop of Weaver's blood.

He assumed that there were other Awakened with similar abilities, but there had to be very, very few of them… and what were the chances that one would find their way to the dark island beyond the immolating sea of stars, which was hidden in the depths of this endless void?

And how would they enter the pagoda without causing its seal to break?

'Just who was it that snuck into the Obsidian Tower unseen? And when?'

It had to have happened long before today. Sunny knew for a fact that Saint would not have let anyone come and go without waking him up. Neither would his shadows: even when he slept, they were

aware and vigilant.

So… it could have happened at any point in the thousands of years since the tower had been abandoned by its rightful owner.

For now, he had no answer.

Feeling a little apprehensive, Sunny approached the pile of broken dolls and studied them for some time. Saint came closer, too, and stared at them silently. Then, she poked one with the tip of the Midnight Shard and turned away indifferently, as if losing all interest in the porcelain mannequins.

'...I guess she doesn't care too much about lesser versions of her.'

Saint had repeatedly shown her disdain toward things that seemed to be replicas of her kind. It had been the same with the Black Knight, and even with the walking colossus of the Forgotten Shore. Sunny clearly remembered how unimpressed his Shadow had been with the awesome stone giant.

Turning away from the broken dolls, Sunny looked around and noticed that the walls of the chamber were lined with massive glass vessels. Some were whole and some were broken, but all were empty. The glass was black and opaque, covered with a thick layer of soot… from the inside.

'...Weird.'

Not finding anything else of interest on the underground level, he returned to where he had started and rested for a while, drinking water from the Endless Spring and trying to suppress his hunger.

'This place is so… eerie.'

It was, indeed. The black tower stood at the edge of an endless void of darkness, empty and abandoned, with everything inside of it made out of nothing, by an inhuman mind. It was not a very welcoming place... at least not for humans. Sunny stared at the ancient walls that surrounded him, and wondered about the secrets of the past.

After a while, he stood up and cautiously headed for the second level

of the great pagoda.

…As soon as Sunny set foot on it, though, he instantly felt that something was very, very wrong there.

The feeling of deep, subtle, primordial terror he suddenly experienced was unlike anything he had known before… with the exception, perhaps, of those few moments back on the Forgotten Shore when the walking colossus had lifted the giant three-eyed skull from the depths of the dark sea.

But here, this feeling was even more dire, even more invasive.

'What… what is this…'

Just like the underground level, this one consisted of only one great hall. The black walls rose high into the darkness, creating a magnificent and solemn atmosphere. At the center of it, cut into the obsidian floor, was a massive silver brazier. And in it…

Sunny shuddered and took a step back.

Something was… growing from the brazier, spreading outward like a vile kind of rot. It had infected the very stone of the ancient tower, turning it into a semblance of repulsive, black, pulsating flesh. The silver brazier was infected by the terrifying growth, too, its metal somehow becoming a part of it.

It seemed as if everything would become absorbed and transformed by the spreading corruption as long as it was touched by the harrowing growth… entire worlds would be devoured by it, perhaps, if given chance.

The thing slowly spreading from the ancient brazier felt like… pure evil.

Sunny shivered, gave Saint a signal to stay back, and shifted his gaze slightly. He was looking past spreading black flesh, at the source of this harrowing infection.

At the very center of the brazier, blackened by the flames that must have raged in it once, lay a severed human arm. Well… it resembled

that of a human, at least.

The arm was much longer than it should have been, and the hand had seven fingers that ended with sharp claws. The rot seemed to be spreading from a terrible torn wound on the forearm, to the charred and emaciated flesh, and then outward, to everything else around it.

Despite the repugnant state of the severed arm, the cut that separated it at the shoulder seemed clean and perfectly smooth, as if delivered by a steady and unfaltering blade.

But Sunny was more affected by something else.

A deep frown appeared on his face when he noticed it…

In his mind's eye, the vile arm was radiating a blindingly bright, overwhelming, beautiful golden radiance.

It was awash in the light of divinity.

A frightening thought appeared in Sunny's head.

'Can... can it be?'

In front of him, stricken by the harrowing rot, was... a severed arm of a deity.

...It was also the reason why fate had brought him to this lost and forgotten corner of the abyss.

Chapter-448: Golden Needle

Sunny stared at the severed arm of an unknown deity, then at the harrowing, profane rot spreading from it. Then, he tiredly rubbed his face.

'...Why can't anything ever be easy?'

He was sure that his fate was somehow connected to that arm, which meant that he was going to have to get to it somehow. But Sunny was also sure that there weren't enough rewards in all of the universe to make him go anywhere near that rot, let alone touch something infected by it.

He had the feeling that this thing was way, way out of his league.

In fact, he suspected that a divine being had ruthlessly severed their own arm because even someone as powerful as that had no means to resist that spreading corruption.

What was Sunny supposed to do, then?

Well…

Trying to remain as far from the rot as possible, he studied it for a while before coming to a strange conclusion… or rather, a strange question.

If the corruption was so terrible, then why had it not spread through the entire tower? Why had it only managed to crawl a few meters out of the silver brazier, turning a small portion of the second level of the pagoda into its flesh?

'Scratch that. Why didn't the whole island become one giant chunk of rotten black... whatever the hell that thing is?'

The answer was not hard to guess. It was because the rot, just like everything else inside the tower, had been sealed away from time for thousands of years.

And now that Sunny had broken that seal…

His frown deepened as he glanced at the silver hearth that was overgrown and had become a part of the spreading rot.

Now, there were only two possibilities. Time was going to catch up to the devouring corruption, and it was either going to slowly consume everything… or starve and die.

Could that thing last for thousands of years with nothing to feed on except for cold stone? Did it need to feed on flesh and souls, or would anything do?

'...I guess I am going to find out.'

Keeping an eye on the patch of harrowing rot, Sunny tried to suppress his fear and took a step forward.

It didn't seem like the rot was spreading. At least not yet.

In any case, he wasn't going to get closer to it. But he also knew that if the worst happened, he had no tool at his disposal that would save him. If that thing began to grow, slowly spreading across the whole of the Obsidian Tower, and then across the whole island, Sunny was simply going to die. Probably jump down into nothingness to avoid becoming a part of that... thing.

There was nowhere else to retreat to in the Sky Below, after all. And he doubted that he would be able to find a second secret island out there in the void...

So, his only hope was to find something inside the pagoda to save him. He had to explore further…

Plus, there was a possibility that the rot would swiftly wither and die. Not that Sunny would bet on it.

Pressing his back against the cold obsidian, Sunny dismissed Saint

and skirted around the outer wall of the great hall until he reached the staircase that led higher, to the third level. There, he summoned the taciturn demon again, hesitated for a bit, and then left one of his shadows to keep an eye on the devouring rot.

Feeling irrational panic at the thought of turning his back to the silver brazier, Sunny gritted his teeth, and then cautiously ascended the spiraling stairs.

As soon as the terrible thing disappeared from view, he let out a relieved sigh and realized that his entire body was covered in a cold sweat. Raising a trembling hand, Sunny wiped his face, and then continued to climb higher.

Saint being by his side gave him a little confidence, at least. The Shadow seemed absolutely unperturbed by the horrific visage they had left behind.

'...I bet fear can't even fit into that stone head of hers. Do Shadows have the ability to be afraid?'

He didn't know whether or not Saint could feel fear, but the gloomy shadow certainly could. In fact, behind its haughty exterior, it was rather cowardly. He was sure that the bastard would have been trembling all over if not for the fact that it was currently wrapped around his body.

Trying to distract himself with these thoughts, Sunny entered the third level of the Obsidian Tower… and froze, dumbfounded by what he saw there.

'I… I see. Wait, no. What the hell am I looking at?'

The chamber he found himself in was smaller than the previous three halls he had explored — mostly because the pagoda narrowed the higher it went, but also because the level was separated into several chambers.

And in that chamber in particular, dozens of porcelains arms floated in the air, each at a different level of being disassembled into tiny parts.

It was as though someone had stolen them from the pile of broken dolls in the basement of the Obsidian Tower and then brought them here to… to do what, exactly?

Sunny stared at the floating garden of disassembled arms, and then walked closer. He felt as though he was in some bizarre anatomy museum…

As it turns out, the porcelain dolls were much more complex than he had thought. In their disassembled state, their limbs showed how intricate the design was, and how many moving parts went into making each one as functional and articulated as that of a human. The joints, in particular, seemed like a marvel of engineering… not to mention the incredibly delicate weave of the diamond string beneath.

Even spelltech automatons could not boast of that level of ingenuity and intricacy.

But why were these arms brought here and taken apart? Who had done it? The Prince of the Underworld himself?

It didn't look like it… why would he need to study his abandoned creations?

It all became clearer when Sunny reached a stone pedestal standing at the far end of the chamber and saw a faint golden light emanating from a small object laying on it.

On the surface of the table were numerous parts that had been scavenged from the disassembled porcelain arms, several skeins of beautiful diamond string… and a long, narrow needle.

It was the needle that gave off a faint, weak radiance.

Sunny looked at the needle, then glanced at the floating porcelain arms, noting for the first time that each was missing a part or two.

Finally, different pieces of information connected in his mind, and he felt that he understood something about what had transpired in the Obsidian Tower.

Sometime after the Prince of the Underworld had left this hidden

island — perhaps years, or perhaps thousands of years — an uninvited guest had snuck into the black pagoda like a thief, somehow getting past the closed gates without ever opening them or disturbing the seal that had been preserving this place from being ravaged by time.

That thief was a divine creature themselves… and also horribly wounded. One of their arms had been torn open and infected by the spreading rot that no one, not even a deity like them, could expel.

That was why the thief had severed their infected arm at the shoulder and tossed it into the divine flame that had been burning in the silver brazier on the second level, and then went down to the basement to collect limbs from the broken porcelain dolls. It was that deity that had circled the pile of them and left the footprints in the dust for Sunny to notice.

In the end, the thief ascended to the third floor and fashioned a new arm for themselves from the parts of the Prince's discarded mannequins… and then sewn it onto their body with the diamond strings threaded through a sharp needle.

…That was the needle Sunny was currently staring at, and the divine light on it was emanated by the remnant traces of the thief's blood still left on its surface.

But who was the thief? And why was Sunny connected to their severed arm by a golden String of Fate?

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then reached for the needle… but suddenly froze.

The shadow left behind to monitor the harrowing rot had noticed something.

The black, ulcerous flesh… was changing.

Chapter-449: Thousand Years of Hunger

'Here we go…'

Sunny faced the stairwell and stood motionless, looking at the black rot through his trembling shadow. Sensing something, Saint turned around, too. The tip of her sword hesitantly rose into the air.

The next few moments were going to decide whether he was going to live or die... or maybe be condemned to a fate much worse than death.

One level lower, the harrowing corruption that had been spreading from the severed arm of a deity was moving. The black ulcerous flesh was rising and falling, as if in the throes of… death? Or transformation?

Sunny gritted his teeth, waited for a second…

And then breathed out with immeasurable relief.

'Dying… it's dying.'

It felt as though he had been sentenced to execution, only for a pardon to arrive at the last possible moment, when the rope was already pressing on his neck.

Indeed, the terrifying rot was withering. As thousands of years that passed since it was locked in the Obsidian Tower caught up with it, the devouring corruption appeared to be dying of starvation. The stone surface assimilated into it convulsed and wriggled, as if consumed by pain. The silver brazier was melting.

The growths of the bulbous black flesh were slowly receding, their

color turning ashen. The process was slow, but at the edges of the patch of corruption, the rot was already turning into… into wisps of darkness, which then disappeared without a trace.

As tension left Sunny's body, he couldn't help but sway a little.

'Good… something has gone my way, at last.'

Before, he had been considering his options and finding no possible way to escape from the rot if it was to start spreading.

He had considered trying to damage it with Broken Oath, but doubted that anything the Awakened Memory could do would work, considering that even the original owner of the seven-fingered hand resorted to severing their limb completely instead of trying to destroy the spreading corruption.

He had also entertained the idea of using the Cruel Sight, which was now infused with divine flame. But something told Sunny that the massive brazier where the rot had taken root had once been full of it, too… that was apparent from how charred the severed arm of the transient deity was.

If even thousands of years of burning in annihilating divine flame couldn't destroy or stop the black rot, then what hope did he have?

In the end, though, the corruption had destroyed itself. Neither divine flame nor an actual deity had been able to damage the black rot, but its hunger — and the relentless nature of time — were.

'Thank gods…'

Sunny inhaled deeply and tiredly closed his eyes.

The corruption was slowly dying, pieces of it slowly disappearing, bit after bit. All that was left behind were the damaged stone and the memory of primal horror.

He grimaced.

'But also, damn the gods! Why would they allow for such a thing to exist…'

Shaking his head, Sunny wiped the sweat off his face, then turned around and walked back to the stone pedestal.

Reaching with one hand, he picked up the long, sharp needle and stared at it for some time.

The needle seemed to have been made out of polished iron, but due to the traces of divine blood absorbed by it, the cold metal had assumed a faint golden shine. Sunny looked at it for a long time, trying to understand if this was a mundane item or some mystical artifact.

In the end, he had to admit that he had no clue.

The needle did not turn into a Memory like Weaver's Mask had. He didn't see any spellweave inside of it, either. However, the needle also didn't feel like a simple object. It was… strange.

He thought for a bit, then summoned the Covetous Coffer and carefully placed the needle inside. The skeins of diamond string also went in, easily disappearing into the gluttonous box.

'I will have time to study it later…'

With that, Sunny hesitated for a bit, then reluctantly headed back toward the second level of the great pagoda.

He was going to watch the harrowing rot die, and then try to approach the severed hand of the mysterious deity.

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Some time later, Sunny was sitting on the lowest step of the stairs leading to the great hall, staring at the massive brazier in its center.

What was left of it, to be precise.

The devouring corruption took its sweet time dying. Even the hunger of thousands of years could not destroy it so easily, it seemed. The black flesh writhed and pulsated, disappearing little by little.

Several times, veins of rot tried to spread outward, clearly sensing the

presence of a living being nearby and lusting to absorb it… him. But the profane infestation was too weak to overcome the entropic power of starvation.

The silver brazier, which had long ago become a part of the horrid corruption, melted and fell apart, then disappeared into wisps of pure darkness. Soon, it was clear that the rot was not long for this world.

All that remained from its vile flesh were a few growths infused into the severed arm itself.

Staring at the disintegrating rot, Sunny felt both deep, primal terror and a strange compulsion to try and damage it a little in hopes of being credited for the kill by the Spell.

Who knew what reward he would receive?

But in the end, Sunny remained still.

Firstly, because he wasn't even sure that the corruption would be acknowledged by the Spell as a creature. He didn't really know if that thing was… alive, for the lack of a better word. If it was an entity, a process, or a manifestation of some profane law that he didn't know of.

Secondly, because he was absolutely unwilling to approach the rot, even now that it was dying. He wasn't even willing to let his Memories get anywhere near it. The Memories were connected to his soul, after all. Who knew if that thing was capable of spreading to a Memory, and then to his very soul through the invisible link?

So, Sunny simply sat silently and waited.

After a while, the corruption finally died.

The charred flesh of the severed arm became ashen, crumbled into dust, and finally disappeared in wisps of deep, impenetrable darkness.

All that remained was the empty hall, the patch of mangled obsidian in its center… a single piece of pristine alabaster bone shining with blinding gold radiance.

A sole phalanx of a finger.

Sunny waited for a few minutes, gathering his courage, then sighed and stood up. He glanced at the small bone, scowled, and walked toward it.

…It was time to see what fate had in store for him.

Chapter-450: Alabaster Phalanx

Sunny stepped into the patch of mangled obsidian and slowly approached the alabaster phalanx, then kneeled beside it and lingered, studying its golden shine.

He was trying to determine if any sign of the harrowing rot remained, but also felt pulled toward the radiant bone and found it hard to look away.

'All of this insanity, just for that little piece of bone. What secrets does it hold?'

He hesitated for a moment, then reached down and picked up the phalanx.

Sunny had instinctively expected it to crumble into a torrent of white sparks and hear the Spell proclaim that he had acquired a new Memory, just like what had happened with Weaver's Mask… that Memory being, perhaps, another Drop of Ichor.

But nothing of the sort happened.

The bone felt cold and smooth to the touch. There was still marrow inside, wet and infused with bright golden radiance. Sunny tilted his head, stumped. What was he supposed to do now?

In hindsight, the fact that the phalanx was not going to turn into a Memory was rather sensible… obvious, even. After all, Memories were simply copies of real items recreated by the Spell, just like Echoes were copies of actual creatures — or items conjured by it from scratch following some unknown principle.

This, however… this was the real deal.

The alabaster bone had nothing to do with the Spell. It wasn't a

recreation, it was… the original.

Sunny frowned, feeling unsure about how he was supposed to proceed.

Then, a certain scene suddenly appeared in his mind. Back in the ruined cathedral of the Dark City, Saint stood above the rusted remains of the Black Knight, holding a black gem in her hand. With a hint of some dark emotion burning in her ruby eyes, she raised the gem to her mouth, and bit into it.

Before he could fully process the implications of this image, Sunny followed a strange instinct. Without allowing himself time to think about it, he opened his mouth, put the phalanx inside… and swallowed it.

'What?!'

He blinked a couple of times.

'What did I just do?!'

Sunny stared at his empty hand, in which a divine bone had been just a few seconds ago, with wide eyes.

And then… it was as though a furious fire ignited in his chest.

'Crap!'

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Sunny tumbled to the floor, feeling a harrowing pain permeate his entire being. It was the unbearable agony he knew and remembered all too well… the feeling of his very nature being forcibly changed into something that it was never meant to be. That nothing was ever meant to be…

Or maybe simply not allowed to.

It was the opposite of the euphoric sense of rebirth the Awakened experienced after completing the First Nightmare or returning from the Dream Realm for the first time... the feeling of your whole body

being torn apart and reassembled, only to be torn apart once more.

"Argh! Here… here we go again!"

The torturous suffering he was experiencing was very similar to what he had gone through after consuming the drop of Weaver's blood. Back then, it had felt as though every muscle, every fiber, every molecule in his body were destroyed and recreated over and over again, becoming slightly different with each time.

The agony had been especially excruciating when it came to his eyes, which had felt as though two white-hot rods were inserted into them…

This time was different.

The pain was concentrated in his spine, in his bones, in the marrow permeating them. His fingers in particular felt as though there was molten, incandescent, liquid metal flowing through them.

Sunny shrieked.

"Damn it! God damn it! Damn it all!"

It hurt so much…

However, the torture did not last as long as it had back in the branches of the Soul Devouring Tree. After a few more minutes of it, Sunny felt the Blood Weave suddenly come alive and rush through his veins, absorbing the harrowing heat and then carrying it to every cell of his body. Slowly but surely, the pain lessened.

But the process of transformation continued.

Sunny sprawled on the floor, covered in sweat and breathing heavily. He could feel himself changing… it was a strange and extremely unpleasant sensation, one suffused with a feeling of profound wrongness, but not as devastatingly excruciating as it had been just a few seconds ago.

"Hell, that was... rough."

His voice was hoarse and creaky.

Sunny glanced to the side and noticed Saint, who was standing silently above him and looking away with cold indifference.

'Such heartlessness! No sympathy at all…'

At least the happy shadow seemed very concerned about him… or itself. It was pacing nervously, turning to Sunny from time to time and timidly offering its encouragement.

The gloomy shadow was currently wrapped around his body, so it couldn't offer any feedback. He had no doubt that it would have just mocked him, anyway.

'That jolly guy is… really irritating! I would rather be mocked, curse it all!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny closed his eyes and endured the unpleasant feeling of his body being demolished and reconstructed as best as he could.

After a long while — which felt like an eternity — it was all finally over.

A deep feeling of relief spread through Sunny's body. It felt… more solid, somehow. Strong, firm…

Resilient.

'Just what have I…'

The voice of the Spell suddenly thundered in the solemn dark hall, interrupting his thoughts.

Was he imagining it, or had there been a note of dark excitement in it?

It said:

[One of your Attributes has evolved.]

[You have acquired a new Attribute.]

'You don't say!'

Sunny struggled to sit up, and then hurriedly summoned the runes.

'What… what have I done to myself this time?'

The runes shimmered in the air in front of him, and Sunny quickly looked at the cluster describing his Attributes.

Attributes: [Fated], [Ember of Divinity]...

'Wait… ember?'

This was new. He concentrated on the [Ember of Divinity] and studied the string of runes:

Attribute Description: [Deep within your soul, an ember of divinity shines, almost ready to erupt into a radiant flame.]

'Huh… so I have an even higher affinity to divinity now. Makes sense…'

He had just swallowed a phalanx of an actual deity, after all...

Impatient, Sunny turned back to the list of Attributes, where three more remained. The first two he knew all too well…

[Child of Shadows], [Blood Weave].

But the third one was new. At the very end of the list, several new runes appeared. Sunny held his breath, and read:

Attribute: [Bone Weave].

Chapter-451: Bone Weave

'Bone Weave…'

Sunny let the sound of it echo in his mind, overwhelmed by a feeling of savage joy. He didn't know what that Attribute gifted him, yet, but was certain that it would be something special. The Blood Weave had saved his life so many times, after all…

And after his encounter with the Mordant Mimic, he learned that having strong bones was as important as having tenacious blood.

Shifting his gaze away from the runes, he stared at one of his hands, then made a fist. This was the arm that had been shattered by the vile creature, and then slowly healed while he was falling into the Sky Below. Even though Sunny had already been able to use it for the past few days, it used to feel weak, awkward, and slightly damaged.

But now, it was as good as new.

...More than that, actually. It was better than ever before.

All of his bones felt much more durable and resilient. Stronger. His joints seemed to be slightly more agile, too. His teeth felt as though they could crush stones and cut through metal.

The strangest change, however, happened to his fingers. It wasn't very apparent, though. On the surface, it simply felt as though they had grown subtly more sensitive, the tactile feeling of touching things becoming deeper and richer. However, Sunny suspected that the true change was more profound. He just didn't know what it was, exactly.

Blood Weave had altered his eyes in a very fundamental way, so Bone Weave had to have a lot of promise.

He ran his fingers across the soft surface of the Puppeteer's Shroud,

vividly feeling the silken fabric slide against his skin.

'...Neat.'

Then, Sunny stretched his limbs, sensing their newfound agility. He was already weirdly limber due to practicing Shadow Dance, which demanded the utmost level of pliability from the practitioner's body. Now, however, it was even further enhanced.

Satisfied, Sunny turned back to the runes and read:

Attribute: [Bone Weave].

Attribute Description: [You have inherited a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage. Your bones have been altered and imbued with steadfast temperance…]

He tilted his head, stunned by the somewhat expected, but still profoundly fascinating piece of information he just received.

'Weaver's legacy!'

So the severed arm had actually belonged to the mysterious Demon of Fate. It was Weaver who had snuck into their sibling's tower while bearing a terrible wound, sliced off their rotting limb, and then fashioned a new one from the parts scavenged from the broken porcelain dolls before sewing it onto their body with diamond strings.

It was Weaver's footprints that Sunny had seen in the basement of the great obsidian pagoda.

He trembled.

Even though Sunny had seen many incredible things and lived through many unlikely events, both wondrous and terrifying, he suddenly felt awe. It was as though... as though he was suddenly in the presence of divinity.

Demon of Fate had been to this dark island, had walked the same halls that Sunny walked, and breathed the same air. The sharp needle infused with remnant traces of their blood was currently inside his storage Memory, as well as the diamond string they had used to sew

a new arm to their body. Unlike the miraculous black mask, the needle was not a Memory, either.

It was the actual thing.

But most of all… Sunny had swallowed a phalanx bone of the divine being in question.

'Crazy! This is crazy!'

He blinked a few times, then suddenly thought:

'Was, uh… was this how Neph felt when she first met Kai, I wonder?'

What a random and ridiculous thought…

Then, a slight frown appeared on his face.

…Why would Weaver secretly come to their younger brother's abandoned workshop? What was the harrowing rot that had been spreading from their wound, and what manner of creature could have wounded them so terribly?

What could even damage a deity?

Sunny had so many questions…

Luckily, the description of the Bone Weave was not over. Several strings of runes still remained.

He concentrated and read:

[...When children of the -unknown- rebelled against the gods, Weaver was the only one to refuse the call of war. Despised and hunted by both sides, they disappeared. No one knew where Weaver went and what they did… until it was too late.]

Sunny shivered.

A few things became more clear from this short description. Firstly, it cemented his suspicion that, at some point in time, the seven daemons — children of the mysterious -unknown-, who were also

strangely described as having created themselves — had waged war against the gods. Or, rather, six of them… since Weaver apparently decided to not join either side in this conflict.

Secondly, Weaver's reluctance to participate in the war had landed them in big trouble with both the gods and the other daemons… unsurprisingly. One side would have seen the Demon of Fate as one of the enemies simply by virtue of them being a daemon, while the other would have seen them as a traitor... for that same reason.

That could potentially explain how Weaver ended up being ghastly wounded, and why they had to sneak into the Obsidian Tower in secret.

These two pieces of information were extremely fascinating, but it was the third one that gave Sunny pause.

'No one knew what Weaver did… until it was too late.'

That sounded so ominous. That made it seem as though Weaver alone had turned out to be more terrible than both the six daemons and the six gods combined, in the end.

What exactly had Weaver done?

Sunny really wanted to know the answer to this question, and not only out of idle curiosity.

He was carrying two parts of Weaver's lineage inside of him now, after all.

…The lineage that was described as being forbidden.

Was the reason for that connected to what Weaver had done?

Just as always, the answers Sunny had received brought him a swarm of new questions.

'Curses!'

With a sigh, he dismissed the runes and stood up. There was no sense in pondering about that now, not without finding more information,

both about the daemons and the gods.

After all that had transpired, he was incredibly tired and hungry.

…But mostly hungry.

With a resentful sigh, Sunny gave Saint a sign to follow and headed back toward the first level.

Chapter-452: Above and Beyond

Several days later, Sunny was sitting on a piece of broken furniture in the central hall of the first level of the Obsidian Tower. The Covetous Coffer stood near him, its lid open and its sharp teeth revealed.

He was holding the Cruel Sight in his hand. The silver blade of the somber spear was incandescent with white radiance, infused with divine flame.

…Sunny was currently using said divine flame to roast a piece of repulsive, slightly rotten black meat. That was the last piece of mimic's flesh he had stored inside the Coffer before taking a plunge into the ocean of merciless stars.

Saint was also nearby, staring into the distance with her usual cold indifference.

He glanced at her, then sighed.

"Sorry that I haven't fed you in a while."

The Shadow did not react to his words in any sort of way.

Sunny continued to talk, though, unbothered by the taciturn demon's apparent lack of interest.

"Hey, that's not true! It is not my fault. Blame my incredible luck, instead. What can I do, the Memories I find are just too incredible. How can I let you eat them… I can't..."

He grinned, then threw a dubious look at the sizzling black meat, and sighed.

"I guess it's done…"

Dismissing the Cruel Sight, Sunny brought the meat to his mouth and

took a bite out of it. As he chewed, an absolutely miserable expression appeared on his face.

"...Ah, that's the stuff. I tell you, Saint, this meat can easily be described as absolutely delicious. Simply to die for, even. I pity you, really, for being unable to taste… oh damn it, how can anything be so vile!... my delicious cooking. It's the best Mimic steak you can possibly eat in a lifetime.

Just a single bite… can really… change your life…"

'For the worst!'

At least chewing the damned thing was much easier now. Before the acquisition of Bone Weave, eating mimic's meat felt like gnawing on an old leather boot. It felt pretty much the same now, but Sunny's teeth were different.

They were able to slice and cut through the tough meat of the devil with ease.

Plus, it wasn't raw. That was already a reason to celebrate.

Feeling his eyes tearing up from disgust, Sunny glanced at Saint and forced the smile to remain on his face.

"Are you left speechless by my culinary skill? Fair, fair…"

However, in the next moment, a voice suddenly resounded in the darkness of the Obsidian Tower:

"...You actually survived!"

Sunny choked on a piece of the vile meat. For a second, he thought that his loyal Shadow had only been pretending to be mute all this time, instead simply choosing not to speak to him…

But no, he recognized the voice.

Sadly, it wasn't Saint...

It was Mordret. The Prince of Nothing was back.

'Thank gods!'

Sunny had been burdened by being all alone on the dark island much more than he was willing to admit. Even though he didn't trust the mysterious voice, he felt relieved to hear it.

Swallowing the meat, he took a sip from the Endless Spring, then looked around the hall and said:

"As you can see. Although, being the honest to a fault young man that I am, I have to admit that it wasn't easy… or pleasant. In fact, I can hardly believe that I survived myself."

He glanced at his body, which was still in a rather sorry state. His burns were healing, but much slower than they would have usually healed. Even though the divine flame had not touched him directly, just the heat radiated by it was enough to leave long-lasting traces that even Blood Weave wasn't able to remove fast.

Mordret remained silent before speaking again, as he usually did. When his voice appeared, it was full of genuine surprise:

"You really found the rift in the ocean of flames?"

Sunny shrugged.

"As it turned out, I was more or less falling toward it the whole time. But even then, I almost burned to death trying to reach it. My most powerful Memories were heavily damaged, and I only survived thanks to a bit of luck."

Which was technically true, although not nearly all of the truth.

The mysterious prince hesitated, then asked:

"...Where are you now?"

Sunny tilted his head.

'How much of my surroundings can he perceive, I wonder?'

The first thing that Mordret had ever said to him was ask why it was

so dark, so he probably could see something, at least.

"Can't you see where I am?"

The voice answered, most likely honestly:

"I can see a big hall filled with ancient, broken things. That doesn't tell me a lot, though."

'Makes sense…'

Sunny nodded, feeling the pressure of the Flaw building up in his soul, demanding for him to deliver an answer.

He gestured at the interior of the Obsidian Tower.

"Well… beyond the false stars, the void continues for who knows how much further down. But some distance from the flames, there is actually a single island floating in the emptiness. There is a magnificent black pagoda on that island, which looks like the exact copy of the Ivory Tower. That is where I am right now, inside that pagoda."

Then, Sunny scratched the back of his head, and added:

"But anyway, how come I can still hear you? Haven't you told me that your voice would not reach beyond the stars?"

Mordret sighed.

"That was what I thought. Luckily, I seem to have been wrong."

After a short pause, he said in a strange tone:

"The Ebony Tower… so it does exist."

Sunny blinked.

'I guess it's one way to call it?'

Then, however, a complicated expression appeared on his face:

"Wait... you knew about it?"

The mysterious prince remained silent for a bit, then answered:

"That is what I had been trying to find before… before I couldn't search anymore. There were some hints that a duplicate of the Ivory Tower exists somewhere in the Sky Below. I hoped to reach it."

Sunny chose his next words cautiously:

"Oh, really? What else do you know about that place?"

Mordret thought for a few moments, then answered wistfully:

"It is said that a very powerful being came to this shattered land after it had been destroyed by the Lord of Light. Back then, the Sky Below was not as boundless, and there were much more fragments of divine flame still burning in its empty darkness. That being… wanted to harvest those flames."

Suddenly, a lot of small details about the dark island and the Obsidian Tower became much clearer. Sunny already had suspicions about the true purpose of this place, but now, they were confirmed. The ruined machines outside the pagoda, the blackened worktable, the massive glass vessels covered with soot from the inside, the silver brazier…

The Prince of the Underworld had not truly lived in the magnificent pagoda. It was not his home, just a station he had built in the ocean of flame — which had been much larger back then — to harvest some of the divine fire. Why he had need of it, Sunny did not know.

But he suspected that the prideful demon had either succeeded in his purpose or failed, and that was why he eventually left and sealed the Obsidian Tower, which then stood abandoned for thousands of years.

…And at some point during that time, another child of the -unknown- had come here for a short while, although their purpose was very different.

This revelation came and went. There was a question burning in his mind that had nothing to do with such distant past, instead.

It was much more pressing.

Sunny swallowed another piece of meat and asked casually:

"Harvest divine flames? Very interesting. Was that why you wanted to come here, too?"

Or had Mordret been after something else?

…Was after something else?

The lost prince laughed.

"No, not really. In fact, I wasn't that interested in the Ebony Tower itself, to begin with."

Sunny frowned:

"Why did you want to find it if you weren't interested in it?"

Mordret sighed.

After a long pause, he answered, his voice dark and full of suppressed emotion:

"What I was interested in was not the copy, but the original. The Ivory Tower. The two are supposed to be connected somehow. If one finds that connection… they might just be able to reach past the Crushing and step foot on the heavenly isle…"

Chapter-453: Shrine of Stars

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking feverishly.

A bridge between the two towers…

That was his chance to escape this dismal place and return to the real world!

...The problem was, he had no clue what this connection Mordret had told him about was. However, he had an idea.

In the past several days, Sunny had explored the rest of the Obsidian… of the Ebony Tower. He had made a couple of fascinating discoveries, but most of it was now full of nothing except dust and rubble. Pretty much everything inside the pagoda disintegrated due to the onslaught of time after he had opened its gates.

The most promising and mysterious of his finds, though, was situated on the last level of the tower, in a small circular hall that housed nothing except for a graceful stone arch, which stood lonesomely in its center and looked like a misplaced, empty doorframe.

The most intriguing part about the arch was that it was surrounded by a circle of runes… almost like the Gateway in the Crimson Spire had been.

In fact, that was what Sunny assumed it to be — an inactive Gateway. For that reason, he had spent these days trying to find a way to activate it. He had poured shadow essence into the arch itself, as well as every corner of the hall.

He had studied the unfamiliar runes, hoping to either find a way to translate them or maybe discover a place where they had been damaged, thus rendering the arch useless.

But nothing had worked… yet.

The information provided by Mordret instantly changed his perception of the arch, though. If what the lost prince had told him was true, then maybe it wasn't a Gateway to the real world. Maybe it was an entrance to the magical bridge connecting the Ebony Tower to its Ivory counterpart.

Still... how was he supposed to make the damn thing work?

With a deep scowl appearing on his face, Sunny asked:

"If this place is really connected to the Ivory Tower… then how would one go about using that connection? Do you have any ideas? There is something that looks like a portal here, but it doesn't work. I tried to open it a hundred times, to no avail."

Mordret thought for a bit, then said uncertainly:

"Have you tried saturating it with essence?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Of course! What am I, a fool? That was the first thing I attempted."

He hesitate for a few moments, then voiced something that had been keeping him worried for a while:

"Maybe… maybe it requires some sort of a key to be opened?"

The voice remained silent for a long time. Then, Mordret said:

"No, I don't think so."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Really? Why?"

The lost prince answered casually:

"Because only doors that can be kicked open require locks and keys. The master of this place wasn't someone who needed such things to keep uninvited guests away."

'Huh… makes sense, I guess. He seems to know a lot about the Prince of the Underworld, though. I thought knowledge of daemons was really scarce…'

Sunny sighed.

"So, how do I activate the connection then?"

Mordret considered the question for a second or two, the said with a hint of doubt in his voice:

"The creator of the Ebony Tower was a builder of things. A genius artifex, but also of practical sort… from what little knowledge of him remains. He would have probably used whatever was at hand, and went for the simplest solution. Builders don't like overcomplicated things, after all."

Sunny considered his words.

'The simplest solution…'

A seed of an idea appeared in his mind.

With a thoughtful expression, he took another bite out of the piece of meat and chewed it thoroughly.

The lost prince politely remained silent while Sunny ate. After a while, however, he suddenly spoke:

"Oh, by the way. I don't want to worry you, Sunless… but there seems to be a powerful Nightmare Creature standing right behind you…"

Sunny almost choked again. If not for the fact that he was looking both forward and back at the same time with the help of the shadows, he would have jumped and summoned the Cruel Sight immediately. But he knew that there was no one behind him. Except for Saint…

He swallowed the foul meat, then smiled weakly.

"Curses, you almost gave me a heart attack! That's... that's not a

Nightmare Creature. Can't you differentiate a real demon from an Echo?"

Mordret remained silent for a bit, then said with amusement:

"She is your Echo? Fascinating…"

Sunny frowned:

"What's so fascinating about it?"

However, there was no answer. The mysterious prince was gone once again, disappearing as suddenly as he had appeared. Usually, Sunny was irritated by this annoying habit of his, but this time...

…This time, he was glad.

Sunny couldn't wait to go back to the sixth level, but didn't want Mordret to see what he had found on the level before.

He still didn't trust the lost prince… even though Mordret had been nothing but helpful up until now. Extremely so, in fact. Sunny didn't know if he would have even been alive without his guidance.

'Later… if I manage to return to the Sanctuary in one piece, I'll start trusting him then. A little. Maybe…'

Finishing up his meal — the last he was going to have in a while — Sunny stood up, stretched, and headed toward the stairs.

***

After he had received the Bone Weave and rested, Sunny explored the rest of the third level of the Ebony Tower. However, he had not found anything of note there. He also had not discovered any more traces left behind by Weaver, which disappointed him a great deal.

The fourth level, however… was much more interesting.

The central hall of it was fashioned into a vast, somber shrine. At the center of it stood an altar cut from a single slab of black onyx, and behind it was an incredibly beautiful statue of a young woman

dressed in a flowing tunic, her face obscured by a veil. The young woman was holding a star in one hand, and a bolt of lightning in the other.

…Sunny was pretty sure that she was none other than Storm God, also known as the Goddess of Black Skies. Deity of the oceans, of the depths, darkness, stars, travel, guidance, and disaster.

Which was really interesting.

Why would the Prince of the Underworld build a shrine to his sworn enemy at the very heart of the Ebony Tower?

Their relationship, it seemed, was not as simple as Sunny had thought.

He had been much more interested in the altar itself, though. After finding the shrine, Sunny had tried to place magical coins on the onyx surface, and even spilled a bit of his blood on it.

But this time, the gods had not answered. The coins, too, simply remained laying on the altar instead of turning into shadow essence.

It seemed that the altar was not mystical at all. In fact, as far as altars went, this one appeared to be quite mundane. Sunny had quickly lost interest and continued exploring the great pagoda.

And he had not been disappointed by that decision.

Because there was something very, very important on the fifth level of the Ebony Tower…

Chapter-454: Hope

The fifth level of the Ebony Tower had almost killed Sunny.

It was completely empty, its black walls drowning in darkness and unadorned. There was no dust, no ruined pieces of furniture, tools, or strange metal devices. Not even lanterns.

There were, however, countless runes carved into the walls themselves. And almost all of those runes were of the kind that radiated a sickening, dire sensation that made one feel as though their mind was breaking apart.

The same mysterious runes that the Spell used to describe the Unknown, and that Sunny had seen written on the floor by the prisoner of the small cell that was hidden under the ruined cathedral in the Dark City.

Back then, looking at them dealt a heavy blow to Sunny, but he persisted and was eventually able to read a single phrase that the prisoner had written, unlike everything else, in a familiar script…

Hail Weaver, Demon of Fate. Firstborn of the -unknown-...

On the second to last level of the Ebony Tower, however, there were much more of the terrible runes. And most of them seemed far more intense, far more... powerful.

When Sunny had first set foot into the dark hall, he yelped and jumped back, then rolled down the spiraling stairs all the way back to the shrine of the Storm God.

…Good thing his bones were now much more hardy.

Eventually, however, he had returned to the hall of runes.

Sunny knew that looking at the vile writings could destroy his sanity, maybe even outright kill him, so he had done so with his eyes closed and while leaving the shadows behind, so that they, too, could not see the ancient walls.

Even then, he felt a terrible pressure constantly assaulting his mind.

He was not going to leave without learning at least something from this chamber of secrets.

Where else would he ever be able to study writing left behind by an actual daemon?

So, he tried to limit the scope of what he saw and glance at the obsidian walls, one little section at a time.

The experience was nothing short of horrid, but at least tolerable.

…And only when Sunny summoned Weaver's Mask was he able to look at the portions of the hall without feeling like passing out or falling down in a fit of convulsions.

The forbidden runes turned less dreadful, but did not give up their secrets. He didn't know their language, after all. The Spell, too, either refused or failed to translate them.

His exploration, however, was not for naught. Because, while slowly moving around the dark hall, he discovered something extremely valuable.

It was... a map.

Or rather, a strange semblance of one.

Both the runes and the images constituting the map were cut into the stone, their lines smooth and deep. Sunny did not know what tool the Prince of the Underworld had wielded to leave these markings behind, but imagined him simply using his nail to cut into the indestructible stone that even divine fire couldn't destroy.

At the center of the map, jagged mountains were depicted, shrouded by mist. Directly south of them, an island with a familiar silhouette of

a graceful pagoda floated above flames. Even further south, separated from the mountains by a vast emptiness, was a mighty castle.

Far to the west, a snowy peak stood near a fuming volcano, and nestled between them was an arched bridge. To the south-west, a strange ship floated on ghostly waves. Sout-east of the mountains, divided from them by a long stretch of nothingness, a perfectly symmetrical pyramid was cut into the obsidian wall.

And lastly, to the north, further away than any other image, above all of them, was… a familiar shape. A fearsome mask stared at Sunny, crowned with three horns.

…Weaver's Mask.

The map was strange, however, because the areas it depicted seemed... disconnected, somehow. There were no borders, no terrain, no measure of distance between them. The ideas of north, south, east, and west were only something Sunny had assigned to the map out of habit. Truly, it could have been the exact opposite, or impossible to apply to the logic of the map altogether.

But at the same time, it fit with the geography of the Dream Realm as he knew it, somewhat.

Each of the images had an inscription near them, written in a runic language that Sunny had trouble understanding. It was similar to the one used by the Spell, but also different enough to make translation either impossible or difficult.

But even without reading the inscriptions. he easily guessed what the images meant.

The mountains depicted in the center of the map were, of course, the Hollow Mountains. Even if the image itself was only familiar, their closeness to the Ivory Tower cemented that conclusion. The Ivory tower, of course, represented the Chained Isles.

The castle to the south had to be Bastion. Although Sunny had never seen it with his own two eyes, he knew its silhouette and appearance from childhood, just like any other human in the real world. Its

likeness was the stage for countless dramas, movies, and webtoons, after all.

Similarly, he recognized the great stone bridge nestled between a snowy peak and a raging volcano — it was the road to Ravenheart, the great Citadel ruled by clan Song.

Knowing the position of Bastion and Ravenheart, it wasn't hard to surmise that the ship sailing on the ghostly waves represented the Stormsea, where the citadel of the third great clan, House of Night, was located.

Sunny had no idea what the pyramid to the east represented. The seventh image, however, was rather clear… it meant Weaver. By knowing who it described, he was also able to translate the inscription near the depiction of the mask…

It read:

"Fate."

There was another symbol near it, though, which meant something akin to a question mark, an inquiry. So, actually, it was "Fate?". Basically, even the Prince of the Underworld had no idea where his eldest sibling lived.

…And this was what the images were, in Sunny's mind. They represented the seven daemons, or rather, their domains.

Which was nothing short of tantalizing in and of itself, but also meant several things.

Firstly, that the three great clans had inherited their Citadels from three daemons… or at least built their strongholds in the regions of the Dream Realm where daemons had once dwelt.

Secondly, that the Underworld, most likely, was situated beneath the Hollow Mountains. This Death Zone was the very dark and cavernous domain to which the Prince of the Underworld had retreated after his conflict with the Goddess of the Black Skies.

And lastly… that the ruler of the beautiful and prosperous land that

had invoked the wrath of Sun God and doomed their kingdom to destruction — and eventual transformation into the Chained Isles — was a daemon, as well.

Coincidentally, the inscription cut into the stone near the image of the Ivory Tower was the only one after that of Weaver's that Sunny was able to translate, since the runes closely resembled those usually used by the Spell.

It was "Desire".

The other meaning of the runes, however, was… hope.

The Ivory Tower had once belonged… to the Demon of Hope.

Chapter-455: Doorway to Heaven

That revelation had given Sunny a lot to think about.

The Demon of Hope… or Desire. A daemon whose power was most likely tied to souls and mind. What act could such a being have committed to cause Sun God to destroy their whole domain?

And what had happened to that being after?

Just as usual, there were no answers.

Sunny was slowly learning more and more, though. For now, the pieces of information he had earned were scattered and disconnected. But if he continued to slowly accumulate knowledge, one day, they were going to start clicking together. And then... what terrible and wondrous truths would he uncover?

Enough to make up for a lifetime of lies, perhaps.

…Apart from inscriptions dedicated to Weaver and the Ivory Tower, Sunny failed to translate anything else. He had, however, memorized every little detail of the unfamiliar runes describing the Hollow Mountains, Bastion, Ravenheart, a ship sailing on the Stormsea, and the mysterious pyramid to the east.

'I'll have to visit Teacher Julius when I'm back in the real world. He has to know something about this script, right?'

Thinking about the map, Sunny entered the rune hall, kept his eyes closed, and walked to the entrance to the stairwell leading to the sixth level of the Ebony Tower.

The last one.

When he entered the chamber of the stone arch, he sighed with relief. The pressure emanated by the terrifying runes was finally gone, leaving his mind at ease… the headache caused by them, however, was going to persist for a few more minutes.

Sunny sat down, leaned his back against the wall, and stared at the arch while waiting to fully recover.

The highest level of the great pagoda was not very large, in comparison to the six others. It was just one big hall, circular in shape, and almost completely empty. The only thing inside of it was the arch itself.

It was tall and composed of the same material as the rest of the Ebony Tower. In fact, the arch didn't seem to have been built… instead, it was almost as if it had simply grown out of the floor, without any seam separating it from the black stone. It looked like a doorway that someone had put in the middle of the chamber, for some reason, and then forgot to attach a door to it.

This was Sunny's only hope of escape.

He stared at it for a long time, thinking about how to make the portal work.

In the past, he had tried a lot of things to activate the arch, as well as studying the circle of runes surrounding it. But nothing he had done accomplished anything.

His recent conversation with Mordret, however, had given Sunny an idea.

What had Mordret said? That the Prince of the Underworld was somewhat of a divine smith. A builder of things… but also of the practical sort. That he would have used whatever was at hand, going for the simplest solution.

That more or less confirmed what Sunny knew of the prideful daemon already. After all, Saint and her kin had been created by the Prince of the Underworld. In retrospect, Sunny had completely failed to understand the magnitude of that accomplishment.

To create a living being from nothing… a whole race of them, really. That did sound like something that only a god would be able to do, didn't it?

The Prince of the Underworld, however, was not a god. He was a daemon, a lesser deity. Was the creation of Saint and her people his way of showing the true divinities that he was in no way inferior to them? Or was he guided by some different ambition?

'I wonder how the gods reacted…'

Teacher Julius had described daemons as terrible beings that inspired fear because of their unknown origins and strange powers. What happened after one of them had accomplished something that was supposed to be in the purview of only the gods? Saint's description, back when she was an Echo, said that she and her kin were designed to bring peace, but were born into an endless war instead...

'Huh.'

But regardless, that was not the point. The point was that Saint was made out of stone. Sunny had always thought that it was an integral part of her design, a fundamental aspect of the vision her creator had for the living statues. To make them stronger, perhaps, or harder to destroy.

But after witnessing the porcelain dolls and speaking with Mordret, Sunny was not so sure anymore. The broken dolls showed that the material from which to make his creations had not mattered to the Prince of the Underworld too much.

'What was at hand… the simplest solution…'

Was Saint made out of stone… simply because there was a lot of stone in the Hollow Mountains for its Prince to use in his experiments? There was nothing but stone there, really.

'That, uh… can't be right, can it?'

But somehow, Sunny felt that it was, indeed, right.

He glanced at Saint and blinked a couple of times.

'...Lazy bastard!'

Sunny shivered, half-expecting to be struck down for thinking about the mighty daemon in such unflattering terms. When nothing happened, he shook his head and returned to his thoughts.

There was plenty of stone in the Hollow Mountains, but there was literally nothing around the Ebony Tower. But what about in the past? What had there been a lot of around it back at the time the Prince of the Underworld resided in the Sky Below? What would he have used to power his magical engines?

This pagoda had been built to harvest divine flames, after all.

Feeling the headache finally retreat, Sunny stood up and walked over to the arch. Then, he summoned the Cruel Sight, activated the [Dark Mirror] enchantment, and poured his essence into it, watching the silver blade become infused with incandescent white light.

Then, he hesitated for a moment, and lightly pressed the tip of the somber spear against the cold black stone.

…Immediately, it was as though the floodgates had been open in his soul. The shadow essence flowed into the Cruel Sight, and through it, the divine flame flowed into the arch.

Sunny staggered.

In just a few seconds, all of his essence was spent.

However... the portal did not open.

Something in the hall did change, though.

The circle of runes surrounding the obsidian arch began to glow with weak, shimmering light. That light was dim and barely visible, but it was, without a doubt, there.

Sunny stared at the runes for a long time, and then, a wide grin appeared on his face.

"...Bingo!"

Chapter-456: Leaving Nothing Behind

For the next few days, Sunny's life became rather monotonous. He would meditate while circulating the shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent to enhance the speed of its recovery, pour it into the obsidian arch… and repeat the process.

With each cycle, the runes surrounding the portal became brighter and brighter. The portal was slowly coming to life, filling Sunny with hope so intense that he struggled to contain it. He had no doubt that he would be able to activate the arch.

And then… he would go to the Ivory Tower, find a way to descend back to the Chained Isles, somehow, and return to the real world.

And buy a new refrigerator.

'And stock it with all kinds of food!'

Sitting on the stone floor of the highest level of the Ebony Tower, Sunny looked at the Covetous Coffer, which stood nearby, with a resentful expression. He knew full well that there was no meat left there, or any other kind of food.

Who knew he would miss the vile flesh of the Mordant Mimic one day?

'I guess one should never say never…'

Sunny was close to fully replenishing the shadow essence, so his thoughts began to wander.

Out of boredom, he dove into the Soul Sea, stared at the shadows for some time, then paced around, then summoned some of his Memories

and read their descriptions for the hundredth time, then stared at the looming black suns of his Shadow Cores, then paced some more, then summoned a few other Memories.

'Boring… so boring…'

After a while, something finally attracted his attention.

The runes of Weaver's Mask... had apparently changed a little.

Before, there was a [???] in place of the name of its third enchantment. After Sunny had activated that enchantment… almost frying his brain in the process… the name changed, however.

He blinked a few times, then looked at the runes again.

'Did I... did I read it right?'

But no, there was no mistake. The first two enchantments were just as before, [Mantle of Lies] and [Simple Trick]. The third one, however, now had new runes describing it...

Memory Enchantment: [Where is my eye?].

[Where is my eye?] Enchantment Description: "Helps the wielder peer into the tapestry of Fate."

Sunny looked at the runes with a deadpan expression for a few moments, and then laughed so hard that it threw him out of the Soul Sea.

"Oh… oh gods… where is my eye! Priceless!"

By the time he was done laughing at Weaver's strange naming sensibility, the cycle of restoring the shadow essence was complete.

Sunny shook his head, smiled, then stood up and summoned the Cruel Sight.

By now, the circle of runes was burning with a furious white radiance, turning the somber black hall into a stark tapestry of darkness and light. It seemed as if the air inside the arch was rippling

slightly, hazy from heat.

He walked toward the obsidian arch and, without wasting any time, touched it with the tip of the silver spear. Once again, his soul essence was devoured at terrible speed.

This time, however, only half of it was consumed.

As bright light suddenly hit Sunny in the eyes, he took an involuntary step back and raised a hand to shield them. A cool breeze caressed his face, and he could suddenly smell... bark, grass, soil.

Life.

When his eyes adjusted to the brightness, Sunny slowly lowered his hand and looked at the arch with a bewildered expression.

It was as though a rift in reality appeared inside the Ebony Tower.

All around the portal, the hall was just as it had been — dark, somber, cut from lusterless black stone.

…Inside the portal, however, was a clear blue sky. Sunlight had suddenly invaded the Ebony Tower after thousands of years spent in utter darkness, and brought with it the sounds of the wind and the rustling of leaves.

Sunny could see the skies, but also the ground. A beautiful green meadow continued from where the obsidian floor ended, full of vibrancy and life. A shadow of a tall tree shaded the proximity of the portal, and there was a path of white stone leading from it toward…

Some distance away, a pristine white wall rose higher than Sunny could see through the portal. Surrounded but the blue skies, clouds, and vibrant green grass, it seemed to be the epitome of beauty and tranquility.

The whole sight was like a paradise.

He swallowed.

'The… the Ivory Tower. Mordret was right!'

What's more, judging by how softly the grass swayed under the wind and how lazily the branches of the tree moved, the heavenly island was really… it was really not affected by the Crushing.

In that regard, at least, it was safe.

'Yes!'

Suddenly tense, Sunny quickly glanced at the circle of runes. Just as he had expected, it was already growing dimmer. The portal was burning through the meager amount of divine flame Sunny had been able to charge it within these past days, and was going to close soon.

"Curses!"

Well… it was not as though he had not been prepared to go through the arch as soon as it opened. He had done everything he wanted to do in the Ebony Tower, given the circumstances. There was not much to be done here, to begin with.

Time had destroyed every possible trophy he could have found, and the most valuable treasures — the Bone Weave and the knowledge of the map left behind by the Prince of the Underworld — were already in his possession.

Now, he just had to escape alive.

Dismissing all of his Memories, Sunny wrapped both shadows around his body… and dashed toward the light.

'Please, please don't be an illusion!'

He appeared near the portal, dove inside… and stumbled, falling to his knees.

His fingers touched the soft grass, and, with his tactile sense enhanced by the Bone Weave, Sunny felt every tiny detail of its texture, of the rich soil beneath, of the heat of the sun on his skin.

It was all real.

It was wonderful!

As the portal shimmered and closed behind him, Sunny closed his eyes tightly and let out a short, quiet cry. He had too many emotions boiling in his heart to put them into words.

He made it. He escaped from the void.

He left nothing behind…

***

While Sunny was feeling the joy of escaping from the Sky Below, something else happened.

Somewhere far away, or maybe close by, there was a room built of cold stone, full of deafening silence. It was dark and empty, arranged in the shape of a heptagon, with seven corners drowning in deep shadows.

There were seven mirrors standing at each of the seven walls of the room, pointed at its center.

There was nothing there.

…However, in each of the seven mirrors, a figure of a young man reflected, sitting on the stone floor with his hands chained behind his back.

The young man was still and motionless, almost as if he was just a statue and not a living being.

But then, something changed.

A few moments after Sunny crossed the portal and appeared on the isle of the Ivory Tower…

One corner of the young man's lips curled upward slightly, forming a hint of a smile.

Mordret was glad to see Sunny escape, too.

Chapter-457: Ivory Tower

"Saint… come look at this…"

Sunny sat on the soft grass, enjoying the sunlight and the cool wind. He had not even known how much he missed them... missed everything, really. Looking back, it was hard to imagine that he had endured more than a month of utter nothingness without losing his mind. His experiences in the Dark City, it seemed, made him far more resilient.

...The shadow of the Ivory Tower was slowly moving closer as the evening approached, marking the passage of time. It was peaceful and quiet on the green meadow of the heavenly island.

Answering his call, the taciturn demon appeared nearby and stood silently, observing the magnificent white tower. Her ruby eyes, however, did not show any emotion.

He sighed.

"...Well, I think it's lovely."

The soaring island was not very large, so Sunny could more or less see its edge not too far away, surrounded by floating slates of shattered marble. There was a meadow on this side of it, a grove that rustled under the wind, and a graceful gazebo built of the same white material as the Ivory Tower itself. The stone arch inside of it was also white, and empty. The portal was gone.

Some distance away, connected to the gazebo by a stone path, stood the magnificent great pagoda that had once belonged to the Demon of Hope. If its copy in the Sky Below was somber and ominous, the original was the complete opposite. It was beautiful, graceful, and slightly surreal, as if too sublime to exist in the mortal realm.

…In a sense, it did not.

Something about the Ivory Tower made Sunny uneasy, however. He couldn't quite describe the feeling, but it was as though he simultaneously felt pulled toward it and threatened by it. The sensation did not come from his intuition, but more so from the deepest corners of his soul. It was rather strong.

And there was also something strange in the shape of the tower itself.

There was a weird thing that went around the base of it, circling the whole perimeter of the great pagoda and disappearing from view. That thing was almost of the same color, but slightly less pristine, and made out of long and weathered sections.

After looking at it for a while, Sunny finally realized what the thing was.

…Bone. Wrapped around the tower was what remained of the tail of some giant, dead creature. He frowned.

'...Good thing it's dead. I hope it remains this way.'

Sunny sighed, used the Cruel Sight to help himself stand up, and headed toward the edge of the island. Saint followed, putting the blade of the Midnight Shard on her shoulder.

Reaching it, he cautiously looked down and saw the disjointed patchwork of the Chained Isles far below. From this high, they looked like pieces of a beautiful mosaic that someone had laid out on the backdrop of velvety darkness, with a scattering of radiant stars shining in between.

Sunny gazed down for a while, then picked up a rock from the ground and threw it over the edge.

The rock fell for a hundred meters or so without meeting any resistance. Then, however, it suddenly cracked and exploded into shards, which then became dust and were scattered in the wind.

'...Curses.'

It seemed that the Crushing was still there. It's just that the Ivory Tower itself was not affected by it, as well as the island it stood upon and a small area surrounding it.

How was he going to come down?

Sunny stood at the edge for some time with a resentful expression on his face, then turned around and walked deeper into the island, circling the Ivory Tower from the left.

On the other side of the great pagoda was a clear lake, with streams of water flowing out of it and falling over the edge of the island. In the bright sunlight, it seemed as though the entire surface of the lake was shining with pure golden radiance. Sunny looked at his reflection in the water, then at an intricately engraved bench standing near it, cut from white stone.

Finally, he walked further on and reached a vantage point from which the gate of the graceful tower could be seen.

'Oh…'

The gates looked very similar to those he had opened in the depths of the Sky Below, with the main difference being the color and the absence of soot.

…As well as that there were skeletal remains of a giant beast lying in front of them, its serpentine body wrapped around the tower, its massive skull resting right near the tall white doors. Each of the terrifying fangs of the great beast was as long as Sunny was tall, at least. Deep darkness nestled in its empty eyes.

He shivered.

'Is that… a dragon?'

Indeed, it was. Right in front of Sunny were the weathered, snow-white bones of an actual dragon. The image of the mighty creature laying dead in front of the pristine tower was solemn, mysterious, and terrifying.

What could have killed such a being?

Thinking that he didn't wish to know, Sunny lingered for a while, then headed toward the remains of the dragon. He was desperately hoping that the great beast would not stir and come to life. If that happened… well. It was better to not even think about it.

Reaching the white skull of the mighty creature, Sunny hesitated for a bit, then walked between the terrifying fangs and approached the gates.

…They were slightly ajar, so he didn't even need to use essence to unlock them.

Sunny gathered his courage, raised his hand… and pushed the gates open.

Suddenly, he felt a bit sleepy.

'What… what is this?'

Shaking his head to chase the sleepiness away, Sunny walked inside the tower and found himself in a great hall, bright light streaming through its tall windows. The air inside, however, was infused with a strange, shimmering darkness.

And in its center, there were…

Chains.

Seven chains sprawled from the pristine white floor, as if growing out of it, each ending in a broken shackle. The shackles were inscribed with a myriad of runes and marred, their metal torn. They were also the source of the strange shimmering, which rose from their surface in ethereal wisps.

A chaotic, everchanging mass of pure darkness pulsated in the very center of the great hall. No, it was not darkness… rather, it seemed like a rift in the fabric of reality, one that could devour even light itself.

Sunny tensed, then took a tentative step forward, hoping to see what was hidden behind the darkness.

As soon as he did so, however, a familiar voice echoed in the silence of the great hall:

"Stop, Sunless! Turn back if you wish to live."

Chapter-458: Shackles of Hope

Sunny froze, then took a careful step back and stared at the walls of the great hall.

Mordret's timing, this time around, was impeccable.

It was not like Sunny had planned to get too close to the mass of darkness, but he might have underestimated the danger it presented. To be honest, he felt that he wasn't thinking entirely straight... it was not like he had lost control, but the strange pull he felt outside the tower was much stronger here, exerting a subtle effect on his mind.

Sunny tensed and glanced at the pulsating dark rift, then realized that the pull emanated from the shackles that were the source of it.

"...Why? What is that thing?"

The lost prince remained silent for a few moments, then sighed.

"I really can't make sense of you."

Sunny blinked.

That was not the answer he had expected!

"What? What is that supposed to mean?"

Mordret answered with a bit of doubt in his voice.

"Nothing, really. It's just that… some things about you suggest a certain background, but then there are as many contradictions. Don't you know what a Seed of Nightmare looks like?"

Sunny jumped back, then cautiously looked at the mass of shimmering darkness again.

So… that was a Seed of Nightmare. A vile manifestation of the Spell that grew in the Dream Realm and eventually blossomed, opening a Gate to the real world for the Nightmare Creatures to enter. The thing that Awakened were supposed to seek out and destroy by challenging the Nightmare contained within.

No wonder it exerted a pull on him.

He scowled, then said with annoyance:

"How am I supposed to know what a Seed of Nightmare looks like? I only became an Awakened a few months ago!"

Mordret spoke in his usual polite tone:

"Have your clan elders not taught you anything?"

Sunny opened his eyes wide, a shocked expression appearing on his face.

"Clan? What clan?! Do I look like a Legacy to you?!"

The lost prince did not answer, letting Sunny boil with outrage in silence. Eventually, he slowly exhaled and asked dejectedly:

"Anyway… are you sure that that's what it is?"

Mordret lingered for a long time, then said quietly:

"I am. I searched for it for a long time, after all."

Hearing these words, Sunny frowned.

'...What?'

"Wait… is that why you were trying to reach the Ivory Tower? To challenge a Nightmare?"

He rubbed his face in frustration, trying to find a way to make sense of that statement, then shook his head:

"Why the hell would you do that? There's no shortage of Seeds of Nightmare everywhere in the Dream Realm, ones that are not hidden

behind endless voids and oceans of divine flame!"

These things were not so numerous that one stumbled on one every day, but also not so rare to go to these lengths to reach one. What had Mordret been thinking?

The lost prince answered after a short pause, his voice slightly amused:

"...You are not a Legacy, indeed."

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

"Either you are extra obscure today, or I can't understand you for some reason. What do Legacies have to do with any of this?"

Mordred thought for a bit, then said:

"This Seed of Nightmare… is a very, very special one."

'What is he going on about?'

The only thing that differentiated Seeds, in Sunny's mind, was their Category. A Category Two Seed would blossom into a Category Two Gate, and contained a Second Nightmare. If an Awakened challenged it and passed the trial, they would become a Master. If a Master challenged a Category Three Seed and survived the Third Nightmare, they would become a Saint.

The same thing went for Sovereigns, although there only had been three Fourth Nightmares conquered in all of human history, as far as Sunny knew… and he knew more than most people.

How could a Seed be special?

As if guessing what he was thinking about, Mordret spoke:

"There are a lot of Masters, but not all Masters are equal. There are a few dozen Saints, but not all Saints are equal. And similarly, there are numerous Nightmares… but not all Nightmares are equal."

Sunny scowled.

"How so? Is it easier? More difficult?"

The lost prince sighed.

"Neither. As far as the difficulty of the trial is concerned, the Spell is always fair… in its own perverse way. However, that doesn't mean that the outcome is always the same. What enemies you vanquish determine what Memories and Echoes you receive. What battles you fight determines what experience you will bring back."

Sunny thought back on his own arsenal of Memories, and had to admit that the more unique Nightmare Creatures he had fought, the greater the reward was. In that sense, challenging a… "unique" Nightmare would certainly pose more risk, but also promise a greater boon.

Add the existence of the Lineage Memories into the equation…

A deep frown appeared on his face.

Mordret, however, was not done talking.

"...But more than that, the nature of the Nightmare you challenge determines what knowledge you will receive, and what secret you will be able to glean. As a researcher, you should know that the lessons humans can learn from the decrepit ruins in the Dream Realm are not that profound. Where do you think most of our knowledge comes from?

It comes from the stories people bring back from their Nightmares, of course."

That… made sense. There were actual natives of the Dream Realm out and about in the Nightmares, after all. Like Auro of the Nine.

Even if he was really just an illusion, an illusion created by the Spell was no simple thing.

Most of the knowledge Sunny possessed was built on the foundation of what he had learned from the noble swordsman and Scholar. How much more would he know if he had gone into the Nightmare with the intention to not only survive, but also learn?

Sunny glanced at the dark Seed.

It had grown in the tower that had once belonged to one of the seven daemons. What mysteries would such a Nightmare reveal?

Mordret gave him time to think, then said in an even tone:

"For that reason, Legacy clans — not all of them, but the truly powerful ones — select the Nightmares for their members to challenge very carefully."

Sunny lingered for a bit, then raised an eyebrow:

"...What crazy clan chose that cursed Seed for you to try and find, then?"

The lost prince laughed.

"Oh, no! No one had wished for me to seek it. It was my decision alone. In fact, I suspect that only two people in both the waking world and this one know about its existence. Me… and now you."

He chuckled again, and then added:

"But that is what makes it so special, as well. None of them could have learned of its existence, reached it, and taken its rewards as their own."

After that, Mordret suddenly grew silent. He remained that way for a while, and then added quietly:

"Well… it's not like I managed to do it, either."

He sighed, lingered for a few moments, and then added in a wistful tone:

"Can you imagine what secrets that Seed hides? What one would learn from that Nightmare? A Nightmare... a Nightmare that was created from the chains with which Hope herself had been bound…"

Chapter-459: Seed of Nightmare

'Hope… herself…'

Sunny stared at the seven chains, finding new meaning in their cruel visage and the misshapen, torn remnants of the seven rune-inscribed shackles.

So the Sun God's ire had not been quelled by just destroying her kingdom. He had gone a step further, binding the Demon of Hope at the heart of her decimated domain… for how long?

And how had she escaped, in the end?

He tilted his head.

"So the Demon of Hope was chained here?"

Mordret answered with a hint of surprise in his voice:

"...You know of the daemons?"

A crooked smile appeared on Sunny's face.

"I do... a bit. Why wouldn't I? Although truth be told, there's not a lot of information about them, even among the Dream Realm researchers. So… the ruler that you had told me about was one of the daemons? A lesser deity?"

Mordret kept silent for a bit, then said dejectedly:

"Yes. I am not sure that those two words really go together, though. I also don't know what Hope had done to earn the wrath of the Lord of Light. However, I do know that these seven chains are what is holding is the Chained Isles from falling into the Sky Below."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What?"

The lost prince sighed.

"People think that there are numerous heavenly chains connecting all the island, but in fact, there are only seven, and you are looking at their roots... or rather, there were only seven. Each of them had to be broken for the Ivory Tower to become untethered, of course. So, now the islands are linked by the fragments of the original seven chains, many of them severed from each other.

That is why they are slowly crumbling, one after another."

Sunny thought for a bit, trying to correct the way he used to think about the Chained Isles. The new information was interesting, but not very useful…

Shaking his head, he turned back to the Seed of Nightmare.

"So… what is the category of that thing? I guess it contains a Second Nightmare, since you wanted to challenge it?"

Mordret answered succinctly:

"Correct."

'...That's one way I can get out of the Dream Realm, then… but am I suicidal enough to go into the Second Nightmare alone? Whole cohorts of experienced Awakened routinely perish in their attempts to become Masters. What would my chances of survival be with no one to cover my back?'

Just as Master jet had said, no one survived in the Dream Realm alone. She probably knew from experience.

He scowled.

"Wait… will this Seed create a Gate in the real world if it's not destroyed?"

When Mordret answered, his voice was almost indifferent.

"Indeed. But not for a long time… maybe in a few years, or a decade. It has not matured enough to be able to bloom, yet."

Sunny hesitated.

"But it can be challenged, right?"

The lost prince did not answer for a while, but then finally said:

"Yes. A Seed can be challenged before it blooms, as well as after. If the Seed is not found in time and a Gate opens, challengers can fight their way through and enter the Nightmare directly. The Gate also disrupts the anchors of those near it, so Masters and Saints that enter the Dream Realm will appear in the vicinity of the blooming Seed. After that, they can lead Awakened to it."

He paused, then added:

"In fact, most of the Seeds are not found in time, because the Dream Realm is vast and only partially explored. That's why the Nightmare Creatures are entering our world so often. Challenging a Seed before it blooms is much better. In this case, however… I would advise against it."

Sunny turned away from the mass of shimmering darkness, then asked in an even tone:

"Yeah? Why?"

Mordred let out a heavy sigh.

"Conquering a Second Nightmare alone is not impossible, but attempting it is tantamount to gambling your life away. The chances of returning alive are very slim. That is why Awakened challenge them as members of cohesive, experienced cohorts. Even then, many don't survive… most, even. But this Nightmare is actually far worse.

Entering it is a guaranteed death sentence, regardless of how many challengers there are. Unless…"

Sunny kept his ears open, suddenly very attentive.

"Unless what?"

The lost prince remained silent for a short moment, then said:

"There is a black altar in the place you call Night Temple. On it lies an ivory knife. Only those who have shed blood on the altar and received the Memory of the knife have a chance to survive the trial that hides within this Seed."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'Wait… that sounds very familiar!'

He thought for a few seconds, then asked:

"Would the obsidian knife from the white altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis work?"

Mordret laughed.

"Sure. Having both would be even better, incredibly so. However, I don't know the method to receive the Memory of the obsidian knife. The ritual seems to be different from the one required for the altar in the Night Temple, and I have never figured it out."

'You didn't… but I might have.'

The image of the Covetous Coffer appeared in Sunny's mind, full of golden coins. There were almost fifteen hundred of them inside. Would that be enough to allow him to lift the obsidian knife off the altar?

He had a feeling that it would.

"What do these knives actually do, though? And how the hell do you know all this?"

However, there was no response. Mordret was once again gone.

Sunny was left alone in the beautiful hall of the ivory pagoda, staring at its white walls and the darkness that had taken root between them.

The Seed of Nightmare was calling to him, demanding to be challenged… and destroyed. Or maybe simply to be fed a delicious human soul.

'Crazy. This is crazy…'

Challenging a Second Nightmare alone was very similar to throwing his life away, and that was even without the particular piece of information that Mordret had given him — that no one would be able to survive this very special Nightmare without a Memory of one of the two altar knives, or better yet, in possession of both.

The question was… what was worse?

Challenging the Nightmare, or attempting to survive the Crushing?

Chapter-460: Fight or Flight

Sunny remained in the Hall of Chains for a while, looking at the Seed of Nightmare and the shimmering darkness that suffused it.

Then, he walked outside. Full of thought, Sunny passed between the jaws of the dead dragon and slowly headed toward the lake. There, he sat on the stone bench and stared at the water with a dark expression on his face. The wind lightly caressed his face and his pale skin, soothing the few remaining burns that he had received in the Sky Below.

Saint stood silently by his side, her graceful onyx figure reflecting in the clear waters of the lake.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'...I am almost home.'

More than a month ago, he had ventured on an expedition to explore the Shipwreck Island and search for clues about the whereabouts of the treasure left behind by mysterious Noctis. He had only planned to be gone for a week.

He had found the treasure, but also fought and defeated two devils: one Fallen, and one Ascended, receiving two powerful Memories in the process. After that, he gazed at the tapestry of Fate through the eyes of a divine mask, and plunged into an endless abyss.

He spent several weeks plummeting through a sea of nothingness, only to be met by an ocean of flames in its depths. On the other side of the fire was a black tower built by an ancient demon, and in it was a severed hand of a deity, consumed by a terrible rot. There, Sunny swallowed a phalanx bone of Weaver, and received the second part of their lineage.

After that, he used divine flames to open a portal between the dark void and the sunlit heavens, and found the seven chains that a god had once used to bind Desire, the daemon of Hope.

And somewhere along the way, he met a lost soul who called himself Mordret, the Prince of Nothing… a disembodied voice that came out of nowhere, and helped him along the way.

Now, Sunny just had to do one last thing… either plunge into a deadly Nightmare, or off the edge of the Ivory Island, to be met with the obliterating fury of the Crushing.

With a heavy sigh, he turned around and stared at the white bones of the great beast that had wrapped its mighty body around the base of Hope's beautiful tower once, thousands of years ago, before succumbing to death.

"...Let's get this show on the road, I guess."

***

Some time later, Sunny was leaning on the wall of the Ivory Tower. He was in a tight spot between the tail of the dead dragon and the white surface of the great pagoda, with Saint standing near him, her weapons dismissed.

With a crooked smile, Sunny wrapped the two shadows around his body and circulated shadow essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent, preparing for what was about to come.

Then, he looked at the taciturn stone demon and raised his eyebrows.

"What are you waiting for? Push!"

Saint gave him an indifferent look, then took a step forward, placed her hand on the surface of the massive bone in front of her, and pushed with all her demonic strength. Her feet sunk into the soil by a few centimeters, but the ancient bone did not move.

…Until Sunny joined his Shadow, that was.

Pressing his shoulder against the adamantine white surface, he

poured shadow essence into his muscles, and pushed, too. Although it felt as though the strain was going to kill him, the bone finally gave.

One of the massive vertebrae comprising the dead dragon's tail rolled over, separating from the rest.

"Come on! Keep at it!"

…Of course, Sunny was not going to challenge a Second Nightmare alone. What was he, crazy? Well, maybe he was a little. But being suicidal was not a part of his very mild, borderline charming craziness.

Instead, he was going to throw a piece of the dead dragon's tail off the edge of the Ivory Island and ride it all the way down to the ground, hoping that it would survive the onslaught of the Crushing.

If a dragon couldn't, then what could?

"Put your back into it!"

Saint didn't really need his encouragement… or advice… so Sunny was mostly shouting for his own benefit, since producing loud noises seemed to help him cope with the strain of trying to push the ancient bone, for some reason.

Luckily, now that it had been dislodged, the process became easier.

Together, they slowly moved the massive vertebra past the gazebo containing the inactive portal, then past the grove of ancient trees, and finally to the very edge of the island.

There, Sunny stopped for a moment and tried to catch his breath. Then, he cautiously looked down.

That… was a mistake.

If before the colorful mosaic of the flying islands far below was simply a breathtaking sight, now that he had to actually jump down, it made Sunny dizzy and frightened out of his wits.

"Uh…"

But it was too late to change his mind.

...Wasn't it?

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tried not to think about the inconceivable height and climbed inside the vertebra, which, of course, was hollow at the center. There was just enough space there to fit his body, and that was the reason why he had chosen this particular one, in the first place.

He lingered for a long time, trying to gather his courage.

'Maybe it's not too late... maybe I should just enter the Seed. What's the big deal, anyway? It's... it's just a Second Nightmare.'

But no, there was no way back. He simply had to do it.

Inhaling deeply, Sunny held his breath for a moment, and then screamed in a small voice:

"Saint! Push it over!"

Outside the massive vertebra, the taciturn demon stared at the surface of the ancient bone for a moment.

And then... gave it a devastating kick.

As the tail bone of the dragon plunged off the edge of the Ivory Island, giving Sunny a serious rattle, he yelped, dismissed Saint, and dissolved into the shadow that dwelt in the hollow space inside the vertebra.

Of course, he wasn't going to try and survive the Crushing in his physical form… he just needed a large enough shadow to hide in. As long as the dragon bone endured, the shadow would too, and he would be safe.

…If it endured.

For a couple of seconds, everything seemed fine, but then the vertebra left the bubble of safety surrounding the heavenly island, and suddenly… an inconceivable pressure struck it from all sides like

a hammer of a wrathful god, making the porcelain bone produce terrifying cracking noises.

Once again, Sunny was plummeting with terrible speed through the sky. Only this time, the vehicle he had chosen to transport him was even stranger, as well as spinning like crazy, with the wind roaring deafeningly all around. Luckily, he couldn't get sick as a shadow… otherwise, his already empty stomach would have become emptier.

'Curses! Don't break, you damn bone!'

The vertebra of the dead dragon was cracking and slowly breaking apart… but, miraculously, still holding together.

At this height, the Crushing was deadly enough to pulverize the flesh of a Saint — a bona fide demi-god — into a bloody paste. Maybe even a big, red cloud. But the adamantine dragonbone was only now beginning to slowly crumble apart.

Once the process started, though, it became unstoppable.

Sunny panicked as he watched wide cracks appear on the white surface all around him. Then, a piece of the bone flew away, letting in a chaotic flood of light. Cursing, he shifted away from the breach, but seconds later, another appeared, and then another. The size of the shadow he could hide in was growing smaller and smaller.

'Crap!'

Soon, there were more holes and cracks in the bone than he could count.

And then... it crumbled completely.

At the last second, Sunny slid onto the biggest remaining slab of the ancient vertebra, and then went into a crazy dance, shifting from one side of it to another as the fragment spun and exposed different parts of it to the sunlight.

Small pieces broke off from it, and then, the fragment itself cracked, too.

'Argh!'

Finally, the piece of the adamantine vertebrae disintegrated into a rain of splinters that were too small to fit Sunny into their shadows. With nowhere else to hide, he was thrown out into the physical world, his body instantly becoming the victim of the bone-breaking force of the Crushing.

…Luckily, his bones were now much more robust than before.

And the Crushing was already not as irrevocably obliterating as it had been higher up.

As a loud scream escaped from Sunny's mouth, he continued to fall, feeling his body go through a cruel meatgrinder. But with the help of two shadows and a generous outpour of shadow essence, it wasn't enough to kill him, or even seriously wound him. It was simply painful, damaging, and unpleasant.

The tail bone of the dead dragon had carried him down for long enough to go through the worst layers of the Crushing.

Now, all he had to do was stick the landing.

With a suppressed groan, Sunny struggled to control his fall and finally managed to stabilize his body, preventing it from spinning madly.

The Chained Isles were now much, much closer than they had been before.

In fact, he could even recognize a few nearest ones.

'Don't you dare miss, you pale bastard!'

He really, really didn't want to repeat the whole damned process again.

Summoning the Dark Wing, Sunny waited for a second for the dragonfly cloak to activate its enchantment, and then slowly started to turn his fall into a glide.

A single thought rang in his mind:

'I made it… I actually made it… crap, I really did!'

***

Some time later, a figure of a young man fell from the skies and nimbly landed on the index finger of the giant iron hand that lay in the center of a peaceful, quiet island.

The young man looked a bit strange… he was naked above the waist, with several half-healed burns covering his pale skin, and a menacing, intricate tattoo of a coiling black serpent covering his arms, as well as a large part of his torso.

His black hair was wild and disheveled, and his dark eyes seemed a little crazy.

Sunny swayed a little, caught his balance…

...And turned to a group of Awakened who were sitting around a dancing campfire, staring at him with their mouths wide open.

A bright smile appeared on his face.

"Ah! Good day to you, fellow humans. Say…"

As mad intensity appeared in his eyes, Sunny licked his lips and asked hoarsely:

"...Is that food I see roasting over your fire?"

Chapter-461: Welcome Home

The heavy lid of the metal sarcophagus opened, letting out bluish light and wisps of cold mist. Soon, a pale hand emerged from inside.

Jumping out of the sleeping pod, Sunny landed on the floor, felt the ceramic texture of the armored plates beneath his bare feet, and let out a low, satisfied sigh.

'I'm back, finally!'

It was so nice to return to the real world.

After meeting the cohort of the Sanctuary Awakened on the Iron Hand Island, he traveled back to the Citadel with them. Some were curious about where he had been for more than a month, but most weren't even aware that Sunny had gone missing.

He used the full scope of his formidable ability to bend the truth every which way, and left them with the impression that his recent expedition had been long, but not very exciting.

…They did continue to give him strange looks the whole way back, though. For some reason.

But Sunny wasn't too bothered by that.

After entering the Sanctuary, he went straight for the altar. Since it was the middle of the day and the moon was hidden behind the horizon, he couldn't use the coins immediately. So, instead, he simply touched the altar and left the Dream Realm.

'Home, I'm finally home…'

Even though Sunny had not spent a lot of time in his new house, the feeling of safety both its walls and the real world gave him was

extremely comforting. Miraculously, even though he had been gone for many weeks, his body felt completely fine. It was as though he had only slept for a night.

"That's the magic of technology!"

Glancing at the extravagantly expensive sleeping pod, Sunny decided that he had spent his money well, and headed for the exit out of the basement while whistling a cheerful tune.

Then, however, he froze.

'What the hell…'

Something was not right.

First of all, he had never used the lighting in the underground dojo. But now, it was turned on, drowning everything with bright light.

Secondly, the armored doors of the lift leading up were violently torn open. It was as though a massive Nightmare Creature had broken through the defense systems of the house and ripped them apart, bending the adamantine alloy like it was wax.

'Crap!'

Sunny jumped back and summoned the Cruel Sight.

What could have come here? Did a Gate open nearby?

Full of tension and grim determination, he used the stairwell to climb to the ground floor and cautiously entered his living room.

The first thing he saw there were…

Dirty… dishes? Lots and lots of dirty dishes...

The second thing he saw were two hazel eyes staring at him with scathing accusation.

'Have I gone really… really crazy?'

Somehow, Effie was in his living room, sitting in her wheelchair with

a bowl of steaming cup noodles in one hand and chopsticks in the other. There was a very disgruntled expression on her face.

'What the hell is she doing here? What's going on?!'

Staring at Sunny, Effie swallowed a mouthful of noodles, and then said in a dark tone:

"You're back. Way to make your friends worry, asshole…"

***

As it turned out, back when Sunny had been falling into the Sky Below and thinking about how no one would miss him… he was very, very wrong.

In fact, the opposite had happened.

About two weeks after he stopped answering their messages, both Effie and Kai got worried. Effie went to the Academy to check on him, and that was when they learned that Sunny moved out of the dormitory.

"Bastard! You could have told us that you bought yourself a house, you know? You owe me a housewarming party!"

Sunny blinked.

'A what party? Is there really such a thing or is she pulling my leg?'

Not knowing where to find him, Kai used his connections to learn Sunny's new address. Since he was limited in where he could go without drawing the attention of the press, Effie went instead. And when she found the basement locked… well…

"My… my armored doors! It was you, you broke them!"

She sneered.

"What are you crying about? Those "armored" doors of yours were pathetically easy to break, anyway. Buy yourself better ones! Anyway, I thought that I was going to find your corpse in the

sleeping pod. Do you even know how that made me feel?"

A heavy expression appeared on her face.

"That would have been a… a real tragedy…"

Sunny sighed.

'Well. At least she cares.'

"...I mean, just think about it, all those amazing Memories you hoard, gone just like that! If you're going to die, at least give them to me before you do!"

'...Spoke too soon.'

After making sure that his life signs were stable inside the sleeping pod, Effie stayed to keep a watch on him, while both she and Kai tried to find out where Sunny was. Apparently, they went as far as contacting the representatives of the White Feather clan.

"You didn't!"

Sunny grabbed his head, realizing that he had a lot of explaining to do once he was back in the Sanctuary. A cohort of random Awakened was one thing, but if Saint Tyris herself was aware of his disappearance, things were going to get much harder for him.

Effie snorted.

"Of course we did! We also contacted Cassie and her Fire Keepers, since they have a cohort in that remote hellhole you are anchored at. But even she didn't know where the hell you have disappeared to!"

'Curses!'

They even brought Cassie into it…

Sunny groaned.

"But why… why would you do all this?"

Effie gave him a long look, then shook her head dejectedly.

"Doofus… can you stop being such a doofus?"

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She shook her head again and activated her communicator.

"Ponder on it! And while you're at it, be quiet for a few minutes. I need to call Kai and tell him that you have turned up. Poor guy must have flown halfway to the Chained Isles by now."

Sunny eyes grew wide.

"F—flown… what?!"

Effie gave him a pitying look.

Then, she said:

"...What part of be quiet did you not understand?"

Chapter-462: An Epic Quest

After Effie gave Kai a call and let him know that Sunny was alive and back in the real world, they spent a minute in awkward silence.

Sunny looked around, taking in the sight of his once pristine and orderly living room. Now, there were dirty dishes everywhere, as well as empty packets of take-out food… at least he thought that that was what they were, since he had never actually bought one before.

Effie was such a slob!

There were even several pieces of clothing thrown into a corner!

Speaking of clothing…

'Crap!'

"By the way, Sunny… when did you get this badass tattoo? A big, long snake no less! Makes a girl wonder…"

He sighed heavily, cursing the fact that he had not adjusted the Puppeteer's Shroud after summoning it back in the basement. There were no burns on his skin now, after all.

"...It's not really a tattoo. It's a magical serpent that helps me control and regenerate essence faster. Don't ask why it manifests as a tattoo, because I have no idea, really."

He hesitated for a bit, then asked:

"So you've been just living here for these past few weeks?"

Effie shrugged.

"Sure. Someone had to monitor your vital signs. Plus, my family… well, they deserved a break after taking care of my comatose body for

four years, and everything before that. So I bought a very nice place for us, and then, sort of… moved out."

Then, an animated expression appeared on her face:

"Don't worry, though! The stuff you keep in your bedroom remained a secret. I can't even go up the stairs, remember?"

Sunny stared at her in outrage.

"What stuff?! There's no stuff! I don't even use the bedroom! I can't really sleep, can I?!"

Effie laughed.

"...Right. Makes sense... that you are not doing it on the bed kind of guy. Oh, yeah! What happened to your fridge?"

He glared, then looked away in embarrassment.

"Ah, that… I sort of broke it. By accident."

Then, a sudden smile appeared on his face.

"...Wanna go buy a new one?"

***

Since Kai wanted to meet, Sunny and Effie decided to visit an elite shopping center in the center of the city, and then wait for him in a posh restaurant nearby. The former huntress also told Sunny that she would hold off on asking questions about his unexpected adventure until all three of them were together, so that he didn't have to repeat everything twice.

Which suited him fine, since he needed time to decide what he wanted to tell his friends, and what would be better kept to himself.

There was so much he needed to think about, and do… the journey into the Sky Below had not only disrupted his plans in the real world, but also added new things to his agenda. From training to wield a spear better to setting up a shop to sell the soul shards he had

brought back with the help of the Covetous Coffer, there were just too many opportunities in front of him.

He also had to decide what to do about Rain. And continue practicing Shadow Dance in the Dreamscape... everyone had forgotten about Mongrel by now, surely. No doubt about it.

'Adult life is hard…'

They reached the shopping center with the help of a passenger PTV, which seemed a bit too luxurious to Sunny, but was a necessity, considering that it would have been hard for Effie to move around in public transport.

Not only because of her disability, but also because she was somewhat of a celebrity.

He had noticed at least three propaganda posters depicting her — the way she looked in the Dream Realm, to be exact — on buildings as the PTV drove toward the heart of the city. Even he had to agree that Effie looked… impressive. Like a beautiful goddess of war that knew no fear or would never surrender to anything, not even the hopeless darkness of the Forgotten Shore.

Triumph and perseverance… that was what people needed to see, considering how hard and dire life in the real world could seem sometimes. Even if it was just a sweet, benevolent lie.

It gave them hope, at least.

A hope gave them strength.

...Noticing his gaze, Effie grinned.

"Looking good, am I?"

He had no choice but to tell the truth:

"...Yeah."

She giggled.

"Do you remember how Scar and Park came up with a story to make me seem like some kind of a folk hero in the outer settlement, back when Gunlaug's people were searching for me? Well, the government ran wild with it, as you can see. Plus the fact that I was in charge of the first line during the siege… they made me into a poster girl for the young generation of the Awakened.

Right after Nephis, of course."

Her face suddenly grew dark and solemn. After a long pause, Effie added:

"...It's a shame that neither of them lived long enough to see their stupid story become a worldwide hit. Park would have been so full of himself now, if he did. I can just about hear him boast."

And that was the bitter truth that people didn't get to see. The terrible price of the triumph they celebrated was known only to those who had gone through it, and somehow emerged alive on the other side.

The two of them spent some relaxing time in the shopping center, Effie resting in her wheelchair, Sunny pushing it from behind. From time to time, someone recognized her as the famous Raised by Wolves, and politely expressed their respect and admiration. He, on the other hand, seemed almost invisible.

Sunny didn't mind. It was better that way, really.

Being invisible suited a shadow very well.

More importantly, the act of buying a stupid refrigerator filled him with pure delight — he had been fantasizing about it for so long in the Sky Below, after all. In a sense, this whole thing had just been a giant obstacle on his epic quest to buy a fridge. And now, after overcoming countless dangers and hardships, that deadly quest was over!

Sunny worked out the details about the delivery, and soon, it was time to meet up with Kai.

He had never been to a posh restaurant before, but it seemed as

though his outer appearance was decent enough to not look out of place — the mundane clothes he wore had been chosen with the help of the charming fashion icon himself, after all. Or maybe it was Effie's presence that made everyone there extra polite and a little bit reverent.

They entered a tastefully decorated space and saw a tall individual in a black cap and an ordinary face mask standing nearby. The weirdo was wearing sunglasses inside.

Before Sunny could understand what was happening, the masked individual quickly approached and gave him a big hug.

'Uh… does he really think that his disguise is fooling anyone? And why is he always trying to hug me?!'

Of course, it was Kai.

No amount of masks and sunglasses could hide the glamorous aura of the enchanting Nightingale.

It only made him stand out even more.

Sunny sighed.

'That dashing bastard…'

Chapter-463: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and his Stoic Stone Companions Talking Rock and Silent Saint, Abridged (Volume II)

The three of them sat down and were presented with old-fashioned, paper menus to make their choice from. Sunny stared at the word "steak" for a bit, then shuddered and shifted his gaze to the salad section.

A few minutes later, a waiter approached to take their order. Effie spoke:

"I guess… three portions of bibimbap, three portions of samgyeopsal, three bowls of jjajangmyeon, and three portions of tteokbokki."

Then, she turned to them, smiled innocently, and asked:

"...Oh, and what about you, guys? What are you going to order?"

Sunny almost choked on the water he was drinking from a beautiful crystal glass.

The waiter, though, somehow managed to keep a straight face.

'What a professional…'

...Since they were seated in a private booth, Kai finally took off his cap and sunglasses, then smiled brilliantly. His voice sounded so sincere that it irked Sunny... a little.

"It's so nice to see you, Sunny. Effie and I were really worried!"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"That's, uh… thanks. I guess. I sort of… assumed that you wouldn't notice that I was gone."

Effie sighed.

"I am starting to wish that I didn't, you idiot! Anyway… what the hell happened? Why were you gone for an entire month?"

He hesitated, then said:

"Do you want to hear the long version, or the short version?"

Kai gave him a curious look:

"Let's start with the short version, I think?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Alright. Well, in that case… I basically just wanted to find clues about a hidden treasure, but ended up almost being eaten by a treasure chest, falling into a bottomless abyss on top of a devil's corpse, and being burned by divine flames. Luckily, there is this voice I can hear in my head sometimes, and it helped me to only get burned a little."

Effie tilted her head and gave him a strange look. Kai's smile paled a little.

Sunny took a sip of water and continued in a carefree tone:

"Anyway, deep in the void, I found a black tower. There were some broken dolls and a rotting severed arm inside, which I… uh… ate, sort of. From the black tower in the abyss, I went to a white tower in the skies, and then rode back to the ground on a dragon's tail. That's

basically it. Oh, and before all that, I kind of killed myself, I guess. Got a very nice Memory out of it, too!"

The two of them stared at him for a few moments, and then sighed almost simultaneously.

Kai shook his head.

"I take it back. Let's hear the long version…"

***

Sunny explained the sequence of events that led to him being gone for more than a month, keeping a few things to himself — like the true number of the miraculous coins he had collected, everything having to do with Weaver, and the real reason for why he was so desperate to grow stronger as fast as possible.

When he was done, Effie giggled.

"Well. That [Fated] Attribute of yours has really been in overdrive lately, hasn't it?"

A sour expression appeared on Sunny's face.

"I guess. I had solid three months of nothing too bad or too good happening before that, though. But that's the thing, when it does finally happen, one thing usually leads to another. It's not all terrible, though. I had to work really hard to survive, but other than that, this expedition was a windfall for me."

Kai took a sip of tea, and then said thoughtfully:

"And what about this voice… Mordret? Do you trust him?"

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged.

"After I made sure that he is not just a figment of my imagination, I came to believe that Mordret is indeed one of the Lost, and most likely an Awakened just like we are. Most likely, he can communicate with me over a large distance because of the mirror shard I picked up after putting down that strange artificial Echo of his. Other than that,

though… I don't know.

He is very mysterious, to say the least."

He thought for a bit, and then added:

"Every piece of information he had given me turned out to be true, so far. And very helpful. I might have not been alive right now if not for him. So it's hard to say, really."

Kai smiled.

"Well, in that case, he is alright in my book."

Sunny paused as the waiter approached to bring the dirty dishes away and refill their glasses. After they were alone once again, he remained silent for a bit, then turned to Effie:

"But anyway… I do believe that what he said about the Seed is true. I think I can get the Obsidian Knife, which is supposed to make the Nightmare easier. So… I wanted to ask. Effie, I know that you can snap your fingers and have a dozen of the most powerful Awakened cohorts in the world accompany you to conquer the Second Nightmare. But... would you consider… challenging one with me?"

He expected her to tease him a little before giving an answer, but Effie remained quiet for a bit, an uncharacteristically serious expression on her face. After a while, she said:

"Challenge a Nightmare? Now, barely four months after we had become Awakened? Are you crazy, Sunny?"

He smiled.

"No, I don't mean now. Both of us need time to grow stronger and prepare, of course."

After saying that, Sunny looked away.

"...In seven months. After the winter solstice. That's when I plan to return to the Ivory Tower and go into that Seed. Will you come with me?"

Effie looked at him for a long time, then smiled, too.

"Sure. Why not? I wouldn't have it any other way, even. But, Sunny… I have one condition."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Really? What is it?"

Effie glanced at Kai, then said calmly:

"You need to convince Cassie to join us, too. I don't know what happened between the two of you, but it doesn't matter. Members of a cohort don't need to be friends. They just need to work well together… and our cohort worked perfectly, back on the Forgotten Shore. Caster is dead, and Nephis is gone… but Cassie is still here, and we both know how invaluable her Aspect is."

As Sunny's face darkened, she added:

"Plus, isn't she anchored at the Night Temple? She can help you get the Ivory Knife, as well. That princeling said that having both would be much better. A Nightmare is a Nightmare and will be absolutely deadly, no matter how prepared you are. Letting go of any advantage is stupid."

'Convince Cassie…'

A wave of anger and protest rose from the depths of Sunny's heart. Even though he had time to recover from what had happened in the Crimson Spire and understood the reason why Cassie had done what she had, he was still full of resentment. He was still hurt. He was still unwilling to even think about forgiving her…

But Effie was right.

No matter how he felt about Cassie, she was a boon for any cohort… especially now, since she had grown much more confident in her powers after becoming an Awakened. She also had other survivors of the Forgotten Shore following her as they waited for Nephis to return, and the connection to the Clan Valor emissaries in the Night Temple.

He didn't have to forgive her to fight side by side with her. He just had to trust that she won't betray him again… which he reluctantly did. Even though Sunny didn't want to give Cassie the benefit of the doubt, he knew that she had learned a bitter lesson.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

'...What should I do?'

…It was at that moment that Kai, who had remained silent during their conversation, suddenly spoke:

"If you don't mind… count me in, too. I want to challenge the Second Nightmare with the three of you, guys, as well. In fact… even if you do mind, I insist!"

Chapter-464: Passion Blossoms Hotter in the Cold Heart of Despair

Both Sunny and Effie stared at him in surprise. After a while, the former huntress asked:

"Challenge the Nightmare with us? Don't you have a great position in Bastion, safe behind its walls? Has Sunny infected you with his madness?"

Kai frowned, then looked away. After a while, he said:

"Yes, I do. But… do you guys remember Aiko? She had a gambling den in the Bright Castle. Well, anyway, Aiko has a real talent for managing various things, so the agency hired her as my manager. One evening, we ended up talking about the Dark City."

A sad smile appeared on his face.

"Both of you only lived in the outer settlement, which had its own share of challenges, of course. Much more dire than what we who paid tribute faced in the Castle. But… but life wasn't that bright there, either."

He remained silent for a bit, then continued:

"Aiko had it way worse than I, though. Especially after one of the Pathfinders made a point of making her life a living hell… Andel, whose head Lady Nephis eventually took off his shoulders. We all knew it, but no one really helped."

A heavy sigh escaped from Kai's lips.

"Because what could anyone of us really do against one of the Pathfinders? But there was a lot of these compromises, of little lies we told ourselves as we closed our eyes to every dark, dirty thing that went on around us."

He looked at Effie, and said:

"People were starving in the outer settlement while we had our bellies full? Well, it wasn't our fault, because the Castle couldn't feed everyone. Surely, if there was more food, we would have shared. The Guards decided to harass someone? Well, that wasn't our fault either, because Tessai was too powerful, and we were too weak to resist him. And so on, endlessly.

Everyone went as far as they needed to keep thinking of themself as one of the good guys."

Kai grew silent, then said quietly:

"But, you see, it actually was our fault. All of us have committed the same crime… we were all weak. When I spoke to Aiko, I finally realized that in this world, being weak is a sin, too. At least for us, the Awakened. So… yes, I want to challenge the Second Nightmare, despite being safe and sound behind the walls of the Bastion. Because I never want to close my eyes to anything, ever again."

He looked at them, then smiled.

"Seven months? That's more than enough time for me to prepare. Plus, don't you need someone who can fly? Or are you going to simply jump into that weird undersky again and just hope to miss all those flames?"

Sunny coughed.

Kai had a point…

"Well… if you put it like that…"

***

After Kai's unexpected and poignant confession, they spent some time

simply relaxing, laughing, enjoying their food, and chatting about this and that.

Kai shared his experience of winning twelve consecutive weeks of the Avatar Singer and having to lose on purpose in the end, and the furor his face reveal and the subsequent announcement of Night&Gale's upcoming comeback album caused in the music industry and among the fans.

…He also complained about having to hire a second publicist because of a strange scandal he had gotten somehow involved in on the network, causing Sunny to look away in shame and keep his mouth tightly shut.

Effie mostly talked about all the fried chicken wings she had eaten and all the sorts of beer she had drunk, as well as what types of Nightmare Creatures she had hunted… and fried, and ate. She also joked about all the propaganda events the government wanted her to participate in, and the various ways with which she had managed to dodge most of them.

Sunny shared his experience of buying a house, and how it made him feel. He almost got sentimental thinking about his beautiful armored doors that Effie had smashed through, and about his new, expensive, shiny refrigerator.

Finally, Kai had to return to his schedule. Before they parted, though, he hesitated, then took out two colorful pieces of synthetic paper from his pocket with a very embarrassed expression on his face.

Without saying anything, he handed the brochures to Sunny and Effie.

Sunny took one, and stared at it with a confused expression.

It appeared to be an invitation of some sort. On it was an image of two people standing back to back with swords in their hands, both of them extremely beautiful, in a professional kind of way.

The guy was dark-skinned and handsome, with broad shoulders and an incredibly masculine face. The girl was thin and languid, with a

slim figure that bordered on being gaunter than Sunny had been in his outskirts days. She had a doll's face with big, glistening eyes and full, slightly parted lips.

…She was also wearing a very strange and impractical armor, a regal cloak, and a very expensive silver wig.

'What the hell is this?!"

The title at the top of the brochure read:

"A Song of Light and Darkness"

And right below it, in a smaller font:

"Light shines brighter in the darkest of nights. Passion blossoms hotter in the cold heart of despair."

Sunny stared at the piece of paper in his hand with wide eyes.

"Kai… my friend… what did you just hand me?"

Effie laughed.

"No way! They finished filming it?"

Kai coughed.

"That, uh… yeah. The premier is in a week, actually. My agency arranged for me to attend and give a short speech. So, uh… will you two come, please?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No, wait… no, actually, what is this thing?!"

Effie looked at him with pity.

"Haven't you heard? They made a movie about us. I mean, about what happened on the Forgotten Shore… sort of. Have you not heard about all the casting news?"

He slowly shook his head.

"No!"

Then, Sunny frowned:

"Alright… alright, I get it. But why would I ever want to go and watch this? I would rather eat another Mordant Mimic! Sorry, Kai, but I am not going…"

Effie looked at him with mischief and grinned.

"Oh… hey Sunny, do you remember how I said that I only had one condition to join you in the Nightmare? Well, scratch that. Actually, I have two…"

Chapter-465: Subjective Value

After a while, Sunny and Effie returned to his home — just in time to receive the delivery of the refrigerator. Two tall and broad-shouldered store workers unloaded it from the cargo hold of their delivery vehicle and placed the big box down with a bit of strain. After that, one of them smiled and asked:

"Good day. Where should we put it?"

Sunny waved a hand.

"Ah, no need. I'll do it myself."

The loaders looked at him doubtfully, then simply shrugged and left after getting his signature.

After the vehicle drove off, Sunny looked around, then easily lifted the heavy box and carried it inside the house without any effort whatsoever.

Soon, the refrigerator was standing in the place where his old one used to be, the synthwood panels covering its doors blending in with the minimalist design of the kitchen. Effie and Sunny stared at it for a while, satisfied. Then, he said:

"I like it… a lot. "

Effie smiled.

"Yeah. Really ties the whole room together… doesn't it? Well, in any case, I hope you won't break it again."

After that, she yawned and said in a tired voice:

"Ugh… I'm beat. Time to retire to the Dream Realm. What about you?"

Sunny thought for a few moments. Suddenly, a wide smile appeared on his face.

"I have an errand to run, but after that, I am going in, too. Oh… wait. Where are you going to sleep?"

Effie shrugged.

"Your guest room, where else?

He blinked.

"Don't you need a sleeping pod?"

The former huntress giggled.

"I have one. In your guest room. What? Why are you staring at me like that? Was I supposed to shuffle between the Academy and your comatose body every day?"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then sighed.

"Make sense. I guess I should have put one there, to begin with. What are the chances of me having mundane humans as guests?"

Then, he waved Effie goodbye and headed for the door as she turned her wheelchair around and rolled toward the guest bedroom.

He was very excited about what he was going to do.

***

Some time later, Sunny was in a beautifully lit store, pushing a shopping cart forward and slowly filling it to the brim with all kinds of food, as well as some other things. He was quietly whistling a cheerful tune, imagining all this stuff going into his new fridge.

The contents of the cart would have cost more than he could ever dream to make, back when he had been living in the outskirts. But now, he could not only afford it, but even do so without having to count his money or feel apprehensive about the cost. He could just… buy as much he wanted, of any quality that he wanted, and bring it

back home... his own home.

Life had changed so much.

After a while, he felt as though he got enough. Now that he had the Covetous Coffer, he could not only bring soul shards out of the Dream Realm… but also bring stuff from the real world to the Chained Isles! That meant so much… an unlimited amount of spices, all kinds of snacks to make the long days of exploring less dreadful, various little things to make himself more comfortable.

Hell, if he wanted to, he could even bring a tent and sleep in it like a king!

'Incredible… oh, this is simply incredible!'

Of course, not all of these things could be bought in a general store. But he could visit other places or simply order stuff on the network.

As he was heading for the registers, a familiar voice suddenly pulled him out of his thoughts.

"...Mom! Can we get ice cream?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then slowly turned his head and looked to his left, down a long aisle he was passing.

There, a pale girl of around fourteen years was standing near a tall, graceful woman in her forties. An eight-year-old boy with blonde hair and a bright smile was pushing a tub of ice cream into her hands.

Sunny watched Rain and her family for a few moments, then turned away and continued on his way, leaving them behind. A quiet sigh escaped from his lips.

'At least she's doing fine. Well, of course she is. I've only been gone for a month. Why would anything happen simply because I wasn't here?'

He reached the register, then hesitated for a bit, and turned back.

…When he returned, there were several tubs of delicious ice cream

added to his cart.

***

As the light of dawn shined on the Chained Isles, Sunny appeared on the Altar Island of the Sanctuary of Noctis. He stared at the sky, grimaced at the absence of the moon, and headed toward his room.

Some time later, though, he emerged from there with a peculiar wooden box following him with the help of eight small iron legs. With the Covetous Coffer in tow, Sunny walked into the garden, found a familiar rock, lifted the toothy box, and carefully placed it near himself.

Then, he took out a single soul shard and put it where everyone could see.

Soon, one of the Awakened noticed him and approached.

"Ah, Sunny! You're back? Looking to sell some shards again?"

Sunny smiled.

"Oh… yes, sure. But hey! That's not all. Brilliant Emporium has some new merchandise!"

The Awakened looked at him with doubt, then asked:

"Really? Like what?"

Sunny's grin grew wider.

"How lucky that you happened to ask! Let's see…"

He put his hand inside the coffer, which then somehow disappeared into the comparatively small box up to the shoulder. Then, Sunny began taking out various items, speaking as he did so:

"What do I have in store? Take a look for yourself… toothpaste! Soft, clean underwear! Salt, pepper, and all kinds of spices! Personal hygiene products! Are you a woman?

No? Have a female friend, then? What, really? Well, with the stuff I have here, that can be fixed. Oh, what is this? Would you look at that…"

As more and more people gathered and stared at the absolutely mundane, but precious items that almost none of them had access to in the Dream Realm with something resembling lust in their eyes, Sunny's own gleamed with greed.

"By the way, Brilliant Emporium is also proud to announce the opening of a conveyance service… want our dedicated staff to bring something specific from the real world? No problem! Want to send something to the real world instead? That's not a problem, either. For just a small commission…"

'I am going to get rich. So, so rich!'

Yes, soul shards were a rare commodity in the real world.

But a good pair of underpants in the Dream Realm was, perhaps, even more valuable…

Chapter-466: A Gracious Invitation

Sunny spent a very pleasant morning selling all the stuff he had brought to the Dream Realm to a crowd of Awakened, each of them ravenous for the small comforts the real world could provide.

Very few had a close enough relationship with a Master or a Saint to be able to get these things here, in a place as remote as the Chained Isles. Things were slightly different in large Citadels like Bastion or Ravenheart, but on the frontier, most people simply had to figure out ways to get by with makeshift replacements. Still, nothing could compare to the real deal.

All in all, the Brilliant Emporium was performing splendidly.

Of course, Sunny did not charge too much for the small necessities he sold, but it added up. He wouldn't charge a whole soul shard, even if it was from a Dormant creature, for a tube of toothpaste. But a few tubes, plus a toothbrush, plus some soap and a box of tea leaves, and a promise to bring some sugar with him the next time? That could work.

Unlike before, he wanted soul shards instead of Memories. He was going to take these shards to the waking world, where their value was much higher.

Out there, soul shards came from only two sources: some were brought back by Ascended and Transcendent from their journeys into the Dream Realm, and some were scavenged from the corpses of the Nightmare Creatures that had invaded reality through a Gate.

They were always in short supply, because anyone in possession of a shard was more likely to use it themselves than to sell it for credits. Saturating their Soul Core meant much more to an Awakened than

worldly currency… after all, dead men could not spend their riches.

The demand, on the other hand, was extremely high. Not only because all Awakened strived to become stronger, but also because young Sleepers, especially, were able to use these shards to increase their chances of returning from their first venture into the Dream Realm alive.

That was the reason why even Caster, a scion of a prestigious Legacy clan, had not entered the Forgotten Shore with his core already fully saturated.

And that was the reason why Sunny was going to profit a lot from being in possession of his new favorite Memory... the magnificent Covetous Coffer.

After all, he — for better or worse — had no use for the soul shards whatsoever. He could not consume them, so there was no choice to be made between growing stronger himself or earning credits from others.

He was going to sell the shards, buy Memories, and feed them to Saint.

This simple system was almost unfairly lucrative for Sunny, because Memories, unlike shards, had no additional value in the real world. Every Sleeper and every Awakened could bring back Memories from the Dream Realm and freely exchange them there.

…Which did not mean that Memories were cheap. In fact, they were extremely expensive. But the correlation between the number of soul shards he would have to sell and the number of Memories he would be able to buy was very much in his favor.

And of course, Sunny also didn't even need good Memories. The worse, the better! The usefulness of a Memory dictated its price, but did not affect the amount of Shadow Fragments Saint received from consuming them at all.

His smile was growing wider and wider.

'Two months… three, max. That's how long it's going to take me to

bring Saint to [200/200]. And what happens next? Oh my, I can hardly wait to find out…'

His pleasant thoughts, however. were eventually interrupted by a shadow falling over him.

'...Another customer?'

Sunny looked up and tensed a little, recognizing the person in front of him.

It was a young woman wearing a simple white garment… the same one that had escorted him to meet Master Roan before his journey to the Shipwreck Island.

The representative of the White Feather clan.

He suppressed a heavy sigh.

"Uh… what can I do for you?"

The young woman bowed slightly, then said in a neutral tone:

"Saint Tyris invites you to share a meal with her, Awakened Sunless."

'Curses… that is what I have been afraid of.'

Sunny shivered slightly.

What were the chances of him keeping all his secrets to himself during a conversation with the fearsome demi-god in charge of the Chained Isles?

Saints were creatures of another breed. It wasn't a coincidence that there were only a few dozen of them across all of humanity… they were not only the most powerful, but also the most skilled, strong-willed, brilliant, and deviously cunning members of the human race. Each was a force to be reckoned with.

Nothing less would suffice if one wanted to survive the harrowing trial of the Third Nightmare.

He wasn't sure of his ability to fool such a person.

Sunny forced out a weak smile.

"...It would be my pleasure."

The young woman nodded, then turned around, obviously expecting him to follow.

Sunny sighed, then dismissed the Covetous Coffer and stood up from the rock.

It was time to face Sky Tide again.

***

The graceful stone chateau perched on top of the tall menhirs of the Sanctuary was just as Sunny had remembered it. The open pavilion at the very edge of the ancient monolith had not changed, as well. It was bathed in sunlight and exposed to winds, opening to a breathtaking view of the Chained Isles.

The Ivory Tower floated far above, shrouded in white clouds.

This time, there was a simple meal served for three people on the round table in the center of the pavilion, and both Master Roan and Saint Tyris were preparing to eat. The young woman led Sunny to them, gestured to a free chair, and then moved to stand silently by Sky Tide's side.

Sunny lingered for a bit, then said awkwardly:

"Uh… greetings, Lady Tyris, Master Roan. It's an honor to be invited to join you for dinner. Uh… lunch? Yeah. To join you for lunch."

Saint Tyris simply nodded and didn't say anything, but Master Roan looked at him and grinned. Then, he gestured to the food on the table.

"What are you waiting for, Sunless? Dig in! Food's growing cold."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

If there was one rule he tried to follow faithfully in his life… it was to never refuse free food.

Master Roan didn't have to ask him twice.

Chapter-467: Dinner with a Saint

It seemed that the conversation was not going to happen until after the meal, which suited Sunny fine. Not only did he get to enjoy some simple, but delicious food provided by the White Feather clan, but he also received a bit more time to think about what he was going to say, and how.

Sunny focused his attention on the plate in front of him, and after a few moments, a delighted smile found its way onto his face.

'That's really good!'

Noticing it, Master Roan chuckled:

"You like it? Well… I am not going to say that I cooked it myself, because that would be a lie, but I did hunt the beast with my own two hands. I also watched and gave very wise advice when Tyris was planting the vegetables!"

Sunny choked.

'Tyris planted… what? Sky Tide grew these vegetables herself?!'

The image of the stern Saint doing gardening did not fit into his mind at all. He threw a furtive glance at the unnaturally beautiful woman, and swallowed.

'Yeah… can't imagine it.'

Saint Tyris was calmly eating, not a single emotion appearing on her face. At the mention of her name, she looked at her husband for a second, and then returned to her meal without reacting in any way. Sunny didn't know if she was simply like that around strangers, or

always aloof… in any case, it was hard to picture Sky Tide doing mundane things like gardening.

Not knowing what to think of it, he lingered for a few moments, then said awkwardly:

"...Yes. Thank you, it's very tasty."

It was too good, in fact. The food was disappearing from his plate at a concerning speed, which meant that he had to sort out his thoughts fast.

Basically, there were three things about his recent adventure that were better kept secret.

The first one was the miraculous coins and their connection to the Sanctuary of Noctis.

The second was Mordret… despite the fact that Effie and Kai had easily believed him, telling total strangers that there were voices in his head was not the best of decisions. Besides that, Sunny got the feeling that the lost prince might have been in not so friendly relationship with the emissaries of the Valor clan that resided on the Chained Isle.

Sky Tide did not serve Valor directly, but her clan was still allied to the rulers of Bastion, to the point that one might have gone so far as to call them a vassal clan.

And lastly, there was the whole thing about the Ebony and Ivory Towers, the connection between them, and the Seed of Nightmare. If it threatened to create a Gate at any moment, he would have felt obligated to inform the White Feather clan, so that someone else could destroy it before that happened. But since the Seed was far from blooming, he wanted it all for himself.

However, Sunny suspected that he would have to sacrifice one of these secrets to keep the others intact.

The question was... which one?

Finally, the food was gone from their plates, and the young woman in

white poured beautiful ember tea into their cups. Sunny blew on his, and glanced at Master Roan:

"So, uh… not to appear impolite, sir, but to what do I owe the pleasure?"

'Here it comes…'

He hesitated, then added:

"Is it about my friends making a ruckus after I have gone on an unusually long expedition? You weren't too inconvenienced by having to look for me, were you?"

He was expecting a confirmation, but instead, a surprised expression appeared on the strapping Master's face.

"Look for you? Uh… why would we look for you?"

Noticing that Sunny was confused, he remained silent for a moment, and then smiled.

"Ah! There must have been a misunderstanding. Nightingale and Raised by Wolves did, indeed, bring your disappearance to the attention of our clan. I was going to explore the places where you had been seen last to investigate, but luckily, Lady Cassia arrived at the Sanctuary just in time. She informed us that you would return in a few weeks, so we didn't have to worry."

A tense smile froze on Sunny's face.

"She did? Well… I'm glad your time wasn't wasted, then."

'Damn it! Damned Cassie and her damned visions! How much does she know?'

He took a sip of tea to hide his expression behind the cup for a second.

That changed things… on purpose or not, Cassie had helped him avoid the scrutiny of having to explain his absence to the White Feather clan. That, however, posed another problem.

And that problem was Song of the Fallen herself. The timing of her visit to the Sanctuary of Noctis and this strange action of hers were probably not a coincidence… what was she playing at?

Or was he being too paranoid, looking for a meaning where there was none? Cassie was not some machiavellian mastermind, after all... unlike Sunny and Nephis both. At least she had not been.

Putting down the cup, Sunny cleared his throat.

"But then… why did you invite me?"

Master Roan smiled and produced a folded piece of paper from his pocket.

"Oh, it was just to hand you this. Lady Cassia left you a message before leaving on an expedition with her cohort."

Sunny tried to seem calm and nonchalant as he took the piece of paper and unfolded it. Inside, two words were written in awkward handwriting:

"Desecrated Grove"

They were, without a doubt, left by Cassie. After becoming blind, writing was hard for her. That's why the penmanship seemed so crude.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

Desecrated Grove… Sunny had heard of that place. It lay west of the Sanctuary, separated from it by a stretch of long chains. The Grove itself was not the most deadly of territories, but there were several Corrupted creatures nesting on islands in close vicinity to it.

Had Cassie known that he would want to speak to her, and left him a direction to where to find her?

Why would she lead her cohort to that remote place, which was situated as far from the Hollow Mountains as one could get on the Chained Isles?

'Strange…'

Sunny folded the note, put it under the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud, and smiled:

"Thank you."

Things like that weren't too strange. Since he had gone on a long expedition and missed Cassie, who was planning to remain in the Dream Realm for a while herself, it was logical to communicate through messages. She could have just sent one to his communicator, though…

Although, if he was honest with himself, there was a big chance that he would ignore the message if she had.

Sunny finished his tea, and then asked cautiously:

"So… I can go?"

Master Roan shrugged.

"Sure. It was nice to see you again, Sunless. I hear your Emporium is doing well!"

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Expressing his gratitude, he rose to leave.

Just as he did, though, Saint Tyris spoke for the first time. Piercing him with a penetrating gaze, she said evenly:

"...Have you been to the Reckoning Island?"

He froze.

Under the stare of Sky Tide, twisting the truth didn't seem that wise anymore.

Sunny hesitated, then said simply:

"Yes."

Saint Tyris looked at him for a few moments, then turned away.

"Next time someone asks, say no."

Taken aback, Sunny stared at the stunningly beautiful woman for a bit, gather his courage, and then quietly asked:

"May I know… why?"

Sky Tide kept her gaze at the breathtaking vista of the Chained Isles below them. Then, in a calm voice, she answered:

"You may not."

Chapter-468: Desecrated Grove

Sunny descended from the White Feather's aery in a complicated mood.

If he ever had doubts that the lost prince was harboring dire secrets, now, there were none. Why else would Saint Tyris caution him to not speak about the Mirror Beast, who had seemingly been the only trace left of Mordret's existence?

Mordret had conquered the First Nightmare when he was only twelve… such an individual, surely, would have been as famous as Nephis back in the real world. And yet, Sunny had never heard of him, or of anyone who had accomplished the same feat.

It was almost as if someone very powerful had purposefully erased any mention of the mysterious prince from history.

…How had he lost his physical body, to begin with? And where was his spirit body in the Dream Realm? Did… did he even have one? He must have had it once, at least. The pack Sunny had found on the Reckoning contained a detailed map of the Chained Isles, with the word "hope" written on it next to a question mark.

Back then, he thought that the owner of the pack had been killed by the Mirror Beast. Now, however, he suspected that it had belonged to Mordret himself.

So, the lost prince had at least visited the Chained Isles before disappearing. Was the great clan Valor complicit in his disappearance? Sunny had no real reason to come to that conclusion, other than the fact that the Chained Isles were in their sphere of influence, and that Saint Tyris hinted at her knowledge of the nature of the Mirror Beast.

But why hadn't she killed it herself?

'I am going to have to ask Mordret a lot of questions when he appears.'

Which wasn't going to happen for many days, sadly.

Until then, Sunny had other matters to attend to.

He glanced at the sun and judged that it had barely reached its zenith. The moon wasn't going to appear for a while… so, even though the desire to place his precious coins on the altar gnawed on him, he decided to address the most pressing problem first.

…Cassie.

No matter how reluctant Sunny was to face his former friend, he had to speak to her. He couldn't make plans for the future without knowing who would be by his side as he challenged the Second Nightmare.

And he absolutely needed to challenge it.

Collecting essence was fine, but becoming a Master would change the power dynamic between him and Nephis much more. And even though creating future cores would be harder after he achieved a higher Rank, being an Ascended also meant that there would be much fewer things out there that could squash him like a bug.

…Not only among the Nightmare Creatures, but also among the humans. The more crumbs of information about the Sovereigns Sunny learned, the more disturbed he became. He was distrustful by nature, so he didn't believe that these hidden overlords would not try to exert their influence on him or try to destroy him one day, simply by virtue of being able to do so.

And even without this threat… there were hundreds of Master in the world, which meant that there were hundreds of people who could kill him without breaking a sweat. But if he became a Master himself… well, then there would only be a few dozen individuals he would have to be really wary of.

Like Saint Tyris.

...Not to mention that, as an Ascended, he would be free to come and go from the Dream Realm as he wished. He would even be able to abandon it forever, and never come back.

Wouldn't that be a nice choice to have?

'So… the Desecrated Grove it is.'

Sunny frowned, then returned to his room, took out his map from the Covetous Coffer, and spent some time adding all the details he remembered from Mordret's map onto it. Soon, he was in possession of an intricately detailed depiction of most of the Chained Isles on his hands, complete with descriptions of what dangers he was likely to meet, and where.

With its help, traveling to his destinations was going to be much safer.

Sunny studied the route to the Desecrated Grove and sighed.

'...Shouldn't be too hard. I can probably reach it by morning, and return to the Sanctuary the next day at night, when the moon is high in the sky.'

And finally get to use the coins he had bled so much to earn.

He dismissed the Covetous Coffer, stretched his limbs, and headed toward the exit from the Sanctuary.

***

The journey to the remote island that Cassie named in her note indeed turned out to be uneventful. Sunny rode the heavenly chains in the form of the shadow and traversed the islands on foot, avoiding any Nightmare Creature that crossed his path.

The southern part of the Chained Isles was relatively safe, or at least safer than the northern part. Well, no surprise — it was bordering regions of the Dream Realm that had been tamed by humans more than a decade ago, while to the north there was nothing except for the dreadful Hollow Mountains.

The Desecrated Grove itself was somewhat near the main route from one of the Great Chains — which connected all of the Chained Isles to the rest of the Dream Realm — to the Sanctuary of Noctis. People who were either coming to or leaving the region used that route to travel between the Great Chain and the Citadel, so it was often patrolled by the White Feather forces.

Sunny traveled along the established route, then left it to go deeper into the dangerous wilderness of the flying islands. He carefully avoided all the places where Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were known to dwell, and kept his eyes open for any sign of danger.

However, nothing that couldn't be avoided happened. None of the islands Sunny wanted to cross were rising, so he even managed to escape having to endure the Crushing.

The sun rolled down over the horizon and disappeared, and the moon followed its example.

As the first light of dawn ignited in the east, Sunny flew through the shadows and then soared high into the air, cresting the edge of a large island and softly landing on its soil.

The Desecrated Grove… he had arrived.

Sunny let out a heavy sigh.

…He had almost hoped that some terrible monstrosity would attack him on the way, making it so he wouldn't have to meet Cassie. The searing mess of emotions he felt toward her… was much scarier than any Nightmare Creature could ever hope to be.

At the end of the day, humans were much harder to deal with than monsters.

Chapter-469: Fire Keepers

The Desecrated Grove was a large island, its surface overtaken almost entirely by a forest of twisted, charred, dead trees. The ground was covered by a thick layer of ash, which was often thrown into the air by the strong winds. Grey flakes rained down from the sky.

There were many Nightmare Creatures nesting in the dark forest, and although most of them were only of the Awakened Rank, one had to be careful to not get ambushed, surrounded, or stumble upon an especially ferocious abomination.

Sunny couldn't even begin to guess why Cassie would choose such a place to establish a camp.

However, he could already see the signs of human presence.

There were four chains connecting the Desecrated Grove to other islands, but the one he himself had used was the most convenient. Any sane leader would have chosen the same route, and even though the Crushing was capable of making anyone's path unpredictable, the other three were just too much of a risk.

That's why Sunny wasn't surprised to see human footprints leading toward the menacing wall of blackened dead trees, already mostly covered by a new layer of ash. There were also signs of a battle, with several misshapen carcasses laying on the ground and showing clear signs of their soul shards being removed.

Judging by the fact that they were only partially devoured by the scavenging Nightmare Creatures, Cassie's cohort must have passed through no more than a week ago.

Sighing, Sunny tied a piece of cloth around his mouth and nose, summoned the Cruel Sight, and started following the footprints.

Soon, he entered the ashen veil of the twisted forest. His ability to see through any shadow proved to be invaluable once again: if not for that gift, he would have been scared witless, expecting a sudden attack to come from the surrounding darkness at any moment.

With his sight, the Shadow Sense, and the ability to see all around himself with the help of one of the shadows, Sunny felt confident that nothing would be able to get close to him unnoticed… at least not on this comparatively tame island.

But that was the thing about the Dream Realm. Even creatures that were supposed to be easy to deal with could kill you in a second if you weren't careful enough. Tame or not, everywhere in this godforsaken world was a potential death trap.

As Sunny went deeper into the forest, he discovered more signs of Cassie's cohort passing through. There were marks left behind by violent skirmishes, as well as several abandoned campsites.

It seemed as though the Fire Keepers had been taking their time, slowly exploring the path ahead and moving their camp further and further into the depth of the Desecrated Grove after clearing a long stretch of it.

'Why travel here all the way from the Night Temple? She had to cross the entire region, getting away from the Hollow Mountains, only to get stuck on an unexceptional island. I just don't get it.'

Sunny was clearly missing something…

With a slight frown, he turned into a shadow and glided through the darkness, covering much more distance with every minute than he had been on foot. He still preferred to be cautious, though, sending one of the shadows ahead and moving slow enough to be able to react in time if something unexpected happened.

After an hour or so, he finally found them.

Cassie and her cohort were camped at a secluded clearing that was around halfway to the heart of the island, dangerously far removed from the edge. If the Desecrated Grove entered the ascent phase, the

time window for them to get back to the chain before the Crushing became deadly would be extremely narrow.

Since it was early morning, most of the members were asleep, with only two lookouts standing watch with torches in their hands. Sunny observed them for a few seconds from the shadows, and then sent his own forward.

He recognized both of the watchmen, since they had spent a lot of time together during the struggle for the throne of the Bright Castle, as fellow members of Neph's faction.

The Fire Keepers were comprised of about forty survivors of the Forgotten Shore — those who had decided against pledging their allegiance to the Legacy clans that wanted the recruit them, as well as the government, and had not become fully independent like Effie and Sunny had.

Although Cassie was their nominal leader, she didn't command the whole host herself. Instead, Neph's followers were divided into several cohorts, each operating in different regions of the Dream Realm.

Fire Keepers were not a formal organization, but more of a loose alliance of people who shared similar beliefs and principles, the main being the hope that Changing Star was going to return alive one day.

…Sunny's shadow entered the circle of light created by one of the torches, glared at the lookout, and then waved at him.

The young man stared at it with wide eyes.

"What the hell?!"

The other swiftly turned, summoning her weapon.

"What is it?"

The first one remained silent for a moment, then sighed.

"Ah, crap…"

He massaged his temple, as if experiencing a headache.

"...I think it's Sunny."

***

There were eight people in Cassie's cohort, every one of them a familiar face.

…Well, Sunny more or less knew all of the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, had fought with them back to back, so that wasn't surprising. What did surprise him, though, was how warm they welcomed him.

Even if some were clearly displeased with having to wake up a bit early and wary of his entrepreneurial ambitions — which they had been amply subjected to during the war for the Bright Castle — they were still clearly happy to see Sunny. Soon, his shoulder began to hurt a little from all the friendly slaps it received.

"Would you look at that! Four months on these damned islands, and this is the first time we actually cross paths!"

"How have you been, Sunny?"

"Oh! I was so sad that we missed you in the Sanctuary. Glad you decided to visit!"

Sunny smiled weakly and responded to their greetings, feeling both strangely warm inside and extremely uncomfortable with all the attention.

Truth be told… he was glad to meet them again, too. He still couldn't quite believe that anyone had escaped the Forgotten Shore, let alone a whole hundred of young men and women, some of whom were in front of him right now.

After the greetings were done, he looked around and raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… sure, guys. Likewise. But where's Cassie?"

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other, then one of them smiled.

"Oh, right! You must be dying to see her."

'...Not exactly.'

The girl who spoke shook her head and turned toward a path leading somewhere away from the camp.

"Let's go. I'll take you."

…Not too far from the camp, a deep hole was dug near the roots of one of the dead trees. Beside it, with her back to him, stood a delicate girl with pale blond hair and an elegant rapier hanging in a scabbard on her belt.

Hearing their footsteps, Cassie turned around. A small smile appeared on her face.

"Sunny. You've made it..."

Chapter-470: Come Winter

Cassie had changed since the last time they met.

Her hair was longer, and there was a strange silver half-mask covering her eyes, its surface blind and intricately engraved. It matched the polished steel of the armor she was wearing on top of a midnight blue coat, comprised of a short cuirass, vambraces, greaves, and a segmented pauldron.

The Quiet Dancer hung on her belt, but there was also a long dagger opposite it, its guard twisting upward.

What changed most of all, however, was her demeanor. The blind girl seemed… much older, somehow. Firmer, poised, but also weary. As if pressed down upon by the weight of years.

'What? What years? She's younger than me!'

Sunny struggled a little, then pretended to smile, too, for the benefit of the young Fire Keeper who no doubt expected a warm reunion.

No one knew what had happened between them, after all.

"Yeah. I received your note… cryptic as it was. And here I am. In the flesh."

The girl who had led him to Cassie glanced at them, then made an excuse and went back to the camp, tactfully deciding to remove herself from what she thought was going to be an emotional meeting of two old friends.

…Former friends, really.

Sunny hesitated a little, then asked:

"So… how have you been?"

Cassie sighed, then turned back to the excavated roots of the charred tree.

After a while, she spoke:

"Not so good, actually."

Her voice sounded distant.

"We… we have tried to venture into the Hollow Mountains, as you must know. But it was hopeless. That place is pure death, for anyone who dares set foot into the mist. We hoped to find a way back to the Forgotten Shore. In the end, however, we were lucky to simply escape alive."

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then asked:

"What about you?"

Sunny grinned:

"Me? Oh, I've never been better…"

With that, he summoned the Covetous Coffer, fished out some fresh, fragrant fruit from it, and sat down on a nearby stump. Taking a big bite out of a juicy peach, he chewed it with gusto, and then glanced at the blind girl.

"Oh, sorry. I only brought enough for one."

…Yes, Sunny knew that he was being ridiculously petty. But so what? Pettiness was his middle name. Figuratively speaking.

"So, you failed to return to the Forgotten Shore, and now… what are you doing, exactly? Why are you digging up trees in this vile forest?"

Cassie smiled a little, then answered evenly:

"...I am looking for something."

Then, she turned away from the hole and faced him.

"Yes, I told the White Feather clan that you will return alive. No, I did

not see a vision of where you were, and what you did in the past month."

Sunny stared at her with a dark expression:

'What is this?! She can read minds now?!'

"...And no, I can't read minds. If you must know, my Second Ability allows me to sense what will happen in the next few seconds. That's why I can walk around without a cane, and knew what you were going to say."

He grimaced.

'That's… going to be very annoying, I think.'

Sunny looked at Cassie, reevaluating her armor and weapons. With an Ability like that, she might have become a very formidable fighter. Or not. He didn't really understand how it worked, to tell the truth.

So, he asked curiously:

"Does that mean that you can see now?"

Cassie shook her head.

"No… not exactly. But if I want to take a step forward, and sense falling into a ravine, I can walk around it instead. If I sense being pierced by a sword, I can try to deflect it. And if I sense being asked a question, I can answer it."

He thought for a bit, then said:

"So, what is my next question?"

The blind girl simply shook her head.

"I don't need to waste soul essence to guess. You want to know how I knew that you will come back to the Sanctuary in one piece."

Sunny finished his fruit, threw the pit into the hole, then smiled:

"Indeed. If you did not spy on my recent adventures, then how did

you know that I wasn't going to die?"

Cassie lingered for a bit, then turned away. After a while, she said:

"It's still spring."

He scowled.

"What does that have to do with anything? You knew that I would be fine because it's spring?"

Cassie smiled.

"Yes. I knew that you wouldn't die. Because, you see…"

She paused for a moment, and then said calmly:

"...I already saw you die, in winter. Both of us, actually."

***

After Cassie dropped that bomb, Sunny simply stared at her for a whole minute, his eyes wide and the words refusing to come out of his mouth. Finally, he gritted his teeth and hissed:

"What the hell?! You saw us die?!"

Cassie sighed, then gave him a simple nod.

"Yes."

Sunny growled.

"Elaborate!"

The blind girl hesitated for a little while, then asked evenly:

"Are you sure you want to know? You've seen what happened the last time I shared my vision with someone, and tried to challenge fate."

A dark, resentful expression appeared on Sunny's face. With his voice full of anger, he spat:

"Who cares?! Tell me what you saw this instant!"

Cassie sighed and turned to face him.

"Alright. But remember… remember what happened to the three of us, before. How we tried to deceive fate, but were played by fate instead."

She grew quiet for a moment, and then said:

"This is what I saw: there was a crumbling island falling into the Sky Below, and the two of us — bloodied, mangled, and weak — falling down with it. It was snowing. Above us, a giant bird flew, wreathed in thunderclouds. It was fighting a terrifying black wyvern, their blood falling down like rain. Then the darkness swallowed us… and we were gone."

Cassie looked down, then added solemnly:

"That was how we died."

Chapter-471: Quid Pro Quo

When Cassie was done speaking, Sunny remained silent for a bit. Then, he said:

"Anything else? More details?"

The blind girl shook her head.

"Because of the blizzard, it was hard to see what surrounded the crumbling island, and it was already too damaged to recognize it. So… no, no more details. Uh… you were wearing a metal armor, I think? Not the Puppeteer's Shroud."

Sunny massaged his temples with a bleak expression on his face.

"Well… it's not as bad as I expected."

Cassie tilted her head a little.

"It's not?"

A dark smile appeared on his lips.

"We already know that your visions are easy to misinterpret. You haven't seen us die, really… right? The light go out of our eyes, our bodies being torn apart, and so on. You just saw us badly injured and falling into the darkness. So what? I have already fallen into the Sky Below once, and here I am, good as new."

The blind girl hesitated.

"You fell into the Sky Below?"

Sunny waved a hand dismissively.

"Yes, but that doesn't matter. Wait, no… actually, it does matter. It's

the reason I came to see you. I have almost forgotten because of this… charming revelation of yours."

After that, he grew silent, thinking about Cassie's vision of their death.

Despite Sunny's bravado, inside, he wasn't as nonchalant about it as he wanted to appear. Yes, her visions had been misleading in the past… but not all of them. Some were as straightforward as possible. And yes, although he had already gone through the endless void below the Chained Isles once, there was no guarantee that he would survive it a second time, not unless he had chosen to do so himself.

After the Twisted Rock was destroyed by the Crushing, Sunny managed to survive due to three reasons: one of them was Mordret, one was that he had already been near the Tear, and the other was the [Where is my eye?] enchantment that he had used in a moment of desperation.

That enchantment had almost killed him, itself, and only failed to do so because his already exhausted shadow essence ran out just at the right time. If his reserves had not been depleted, and he was forced to endure staring into the eternity of Fate for a few seconds more, his mind would have been destroyed completely.

If he was thrown into the Sky Below once more, away from the Tear, there would be a very slim chance of him finding the rift in the ocean of divine flame again. Especially if he was as badly wounded as Cassie implied.

And there were giant birds fighting wyverns in the sky above.

So, what he had to do now was… well, what the hell was he supposed to do? The vision did not provide any actionable information. The only thing Sunny could think of was to work really hard to get himself a flight-capable Memory or Echo before winter.

And maybe make a will.

He sighed.

"So… what have you been doing to prevent the two of us from dying?

How can you calmly dig around in the mud, knowing what is going to happen?"

Cassie lingered for a moment, then smiled.

"In fact, I am digging around in the mud for that very reason."

Sunny snorted.

"What are you hoping to find there? A pair of wings?"

She shook her head.

"No… I am just hoping to find a preserved root."

'A root? What can a root do to save us from dying?'

He kept quiet for a bit, then said:

"Alright. Suit yourself. Anyway, I wanted to talk with you about something."

Cassie looked into the depths of the forest, then nodded.

"About what?"

Sunny gathered his thoughts, then explained:

"I have found a Nightmare Seed. A very special one, that contains a very special Second Nightmare. And I want to challenge it after the winter solstice… actually, scratch that. I want to challenge it by the end of the autumn."

His initial plan was to give himself and his companions seven months to prepare, but considering what Cassie saw happening in winter, these plans had to change. Whatever it was that she predicted, facing it as a Master would be much more desirable than facing it as an Awakened.

…Unless her vision took place inside the Nightmare, of course.

Regardless, now, he decided to return to the Ivory Tower before the autumn was over. Six months was a tight amount of time to get

ready, but not so different from his initial plan. He could make it work, provided that other people whom he wanted to take with him would, too.

"That Seed is also located in a very special place. In fact, it's right above our heads, in the Ivory Tower. I found a way to get there without being killed by the Crushing… although that other path is, arguably, just as dangerous."

Sunny pointed down.

"It's in the Sky Below. Effie and Kai are coming to the Chained Isles to join me. We hope that you will challenge the Nightmare with us, too. Oh... and we'll need your help getting into the Night Temple. There's an item we need to retrieve there."

Cassie faced him and remained silent for a while. With her eyes being hidden by a mask and her face unmoving, it was hard to tell what she was feeling or thinking about.

Finally, she said:

"You want me to join? After what I have done to you?"

Unseen to her, a cold expression appeared on Sunny's face. He looked at the blind girl for a long time, then shrugged.

"Why not? We don't have to be friends to go into a Nightmare together. We don't even need to like each other. We can just be… temporary allies. Wasn't that what I was to you, anyway? If you can handle that, so can I.

I don't mind being used, as long as I get to use you in return. Pretty simple."

Cassie turned away and didn't say anything for a few moments. Then, she answered:

"Alright. I will go to the Night Temple with you, and help you conquer the Second Nightmare. But… I want your help with something in return."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"My help? With what?"

The blind girl hesitated for a second, and then said:

"You have been to the Shipwreck Island, haven't you? The creature that dwells there… in a few months, I want you to help me kill it."

Chapter-472: Worthy Reward

Sunny stared at the blind girl with surprise clearly written on his face. Allowing this surprise to seep into his voice, he asked:

"The vine creature? You want to kill that thing?"

Why would she want to attempt to do something that dangerous?

Cassie nodded.

"Yes."

He shook his head.

"That bastard sprawls through the entire island, its vines buried underground. It is Corrupted, which means that our weapons will barely be able to cut it. And, if that was not bad enough, the vines produce clouds of deadly poison. Are you sure that you want to attack it?"

The blind girl lingered for a few moments, then answered calmly:

"It is a Corrupted Monster, indeed. It is terrifying and lethal, yes. But I am sure that we can destroy it, with enough preparation. Everyone has weaknesses, after all. That creature is susceptible to fire, for example. There must be other things we might be able to exploit, too."

Sunny thought for a while, then shrugged.

"Fine. I will help your cohort fight the monstrosity on the Shipwreck Island. I will not promise that we will succeed, though."

Cassie sighed.

"Then we have a deal. My cohort and I will remain in the Desecrated

Grove until our business here is done. I expect it to take a month, at least. Maybe more. After, we will return to the Sanctuary, recuperate, and proceed to the Shipwreck Island."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"And then, I will help you challenge the Second Nightmare."

Sunny smiled.

"If we don't die before that, you mean?"

The blind girl turned back to the roots of the dead tree.

"...Yes. If we don't die before that."

***

On his way back to the Sanctuary, Sunny had a lot to think about.

Firstly, there was the fact that he would have to cooperate with Cassie again, which made him feel all sorts of complicated emotions. The manner of their relationship, at least, was set clear — it was purely an alliance of convenience, and nothing else.

He could put away his resentment for the sake of mutual benefit. After all, Sunny could be a very pragmatic person when he needed to be.

Secondly, there was the perspective of returning to the wreck of the ancient ship, this time to do battle with the vine monster that ruled over the island. Sunny knew very well how dangerous that thing was, so he had a lot of preparations to do if he wanted to come out of that fight in one piece.

The divine flame augmentation of the Cruel Sight, however, was going to come in very handy.

And lastly, there was the ominous prediction that Cassie had made about both of them dying sometime in winter. Or falling into the Sky Below, at least. That… he didn't even know what to think about that. However, Sunny was not going to let this vision affect his decisions.

The last time he had tried to act on the knowledge received through Cassie's prophetic gift did not end well for him… or anyone, for that matter.

The best thing to do was to keep it in his mind, but continue to act as if nothing had changed. At least he thought that this was the best course.

Tired and mentally exhausted from the long journey to and back from the Desecrated Grove, Sunny approached the Sanctuary of Noctis in the middle of the night. His shadow essence reserves were almost depleted, and his head buzzed from all the thoughts swarming inside of it.

Landing on the soft grass and hearing the familiar sound of water falling over the edge of the island, Sunny gritted his teeth.

"Forget about it, for now. First things first…'

The moon was high in the sky, which meant that he was finally going to get his sweet, enchanting reward.

His desire to find the source of the miraculous coins the dead Chain Worm had brought with it to the Iron Hand Island started this whole ordeal, and now, the coins would be its end.

His prize was waiting for him up ahead…

Entering the Sanctuary, Sunny walked through the empty garden and approached the clear pond in its center. Stopping for a couple of moments to make sure that no one was watching him, he then crossed the stone path leading to the small island in its center.

There, a white altar stood in the shade of an ancient tree, and an obsidian knife lay on its surface.

'The moment of truth…'

Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer, took out one of the gold coins out of it, and placed it on the altar.

The coin shimmered, reflecting the moonlight, and then disappeared.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

A big smile appeared on Sunny's face.

Summoning the runes, he read:

Shadow Fragments: [224/2000].

'It works!'

Initially, Sunny thought of going about using the coins in a slow and deliberate manner, throwing a dozen or so on the altar each time he had to return to the real world — to minimize the chances of being noticed and well as arising suspicion.

But now that the reward was in his sight, he decided against it.

No… he wanted all of it, right now.

He deserved it.

Putting the wooden box on the altar, he turned it to the side, and then put his hand inside. A moment later, a stream of golden coins flowed onto the white surface.

Then, they all started to disappear.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[Your shadow grows stronger…]

***

In the end, Sunny ended up sacrificing all fourteen hundred or so coins to the altar.

Frightened to believe that it actually happened, he summoned the runes again, then rubbed his eyes, and read the line describing his shadow fragments three times in a row — just to make sure that his eyes weren't deceiving to him.

Luckily, they weren't.

The runes now showed:

Shadow Fragments: [1657/2000].

'I did it… I did it!'

In the first two months on the Chained Isles, Sunny worked really hard to hunt down Nightmare Creatures and slay them. And yet, he had only been able to collect two hundred fragments. His last journey, harrowing as it had been, though… gave him so much more.

A wide grin appeared on Sunny's face.

'...Who said that greed is a sin? It's a virtue! A goddamn virtue, I say!'

Chapter-473: Mobius Loop

Because of the sudden influx of so many shards, Sunny got disoriented and swayed. His body was subtly rebuilding itself, growing stronger, more powerful… the difference was stark enough for him to feel it with every fiber of his being.

As Awakened absorbed soul shards — or shadow fragments, in his case — the capacity of their cores grew, and their physical capability was slightly enhanced. Usually, it happened at such small increments that the difference was hard to judge, but this time, Sunny had done something pretty preposterous and consumed fourteen hundred shadow fragments all at once.

He wondered if anyone else in history had accomplished the same feat.

'Not… not likely…'

Grabbing the edge of the altar to support himself, he endured the strange and euphoric sensation as best as he could.

How could anyone do such a thing, if — as far as Sunny knew — everyone except Nephis and him were limited to having only one core? They wouldn't even be able to absorb this much…

'Argh…'

Back on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had gone from having almost no shadow fragments to fully saturating his core at a thousand. In the process, he went from being no different from a mundane human, to the pinnacle of humanly possible, to breaking past those limits.

Becoming an Awakened had elevated him even further above what was considered normal. He was much stronger and faster than any mundane human could ever hope to be, and capable of enhancing his

prowess even more with essence, achieving truly superhuman might.

And now, he went through a transformation that was similar in scale to his rise on the Forgotten Shore, becoming so much more powerful. In fact, he was now probably the strongest Awakened both in the waking world and in the Dream Realm, with the exception of those whose Aspects directly enhanced their physique.

And even then, he could still double… even triple his physical ability with the help of the shadows.

'Insane!'

Sunny drew in a deep breath, then silently flexed his muscles, feeling a new strength course through his veins. He felt… incredible. Incredibly strong, incredibly fast, incredibly resilient.

But that wasn't all.

The capacity of both of his Shadow Cores was also dramatically enhanced, almost doubling in a matter of seconds. Therefore, his reserves of shadow essence were now also much deeper.

That meant that he could fight at his peak form for longer, use the active enhancements of his Memories more, remain in the form of a shadow for a bigger amount of time, control his shadows at a larger distance, and travel further when using Shadow Step.

In short… Sunny had just become even more of a menace.

Slowly getting accustomed to his new and improved physique, he couldn't help but smile.

Now that he had finally made use of the miraculous coins, his previous disaster of an expedition came into perspective. Despite how much he had suffered and how close he had brushed with death, it all felt worth it, somehow.

His goal was to grow stronger, and Sunny had just made a big step toward that goal.

…It felt good.

While Sunny was consumed with triumphant thoughts, his gaze fell on the obsidian knife that lay on the altar.

He lingered for a while, then cautiously reached with his hand and touched the cold stone handle.

'Will it work?'

That knife had remained on the altar of the Sanctuary for as long as humans had lived there. Pretty much every Awakened that had ever set foot into the Citadel had tried to raise it off the white surface at least once… including Sunny.

But none of them succeeded. The knife seemed to weigh more than the entire island itself, as if it was glued to the altar. No matter how much people tried, no one had ever managed to move it even by a millimeter.

However, when Sunny used the miraculous coins for the first time, he seemed to have noticed that the obsidian knife moved a little.

Therefore… he had made a conclusion that if he were to place enough coins on the altar, the knife might become detached from it, and fall into his hands.

Holding his breath, Sunny wrapped his fingers around the handle.

'...Here goes nothing?'

Putting all of his strength into the pull, he tried to lift the obsidian blade of the altar.

The knife, however, offered no resistance at all. It behaved like any knife would, easily sliding off the white stone, which then caused Sunny to lose his balance and tumble to the ground in a graceless roll.

Sitting up, he stared at the knife in his hand with wild eyes. Then, he shuddered.

'Crap!'

Sunny half-expected for the entire Sanctuary to suddenly plunge into the Sky Below, or for the Gateway to stop functioning. That's why he wanted to just lift the knife a little, and then place it back down if something had gone awry. Instead, he was now a few steps away from the altar, with no way of getting back to it immediately.

…Luckily, none of his fears came true.

Despite the fact that the obsidian knife had left its usual spot on the altar, the island seemed fine. Everything was just as it had been a few seconds ago.

He exhaled with visible relief.

'Well… good. I wouldn't want to mess things up too bad for everyone here on the Chained Isles.'

Rising to his feet, Sunny looked at the obsidian knife. It seemed to have been cut from a single piece of black stone, with its blade sharpened and polished. There wasn't anything special in how the knife looked. In fact, it seemed a little bit crude, almost primitive.

There was also one little problem.

The knife did not turn into a Memory.

'Huh…'

Sunny had expected it to disintegrate into a rain of sparks and enter his core, just like Weaver's Mask had done, or like Shard Memories behaved when raised by a new wielder. Mordret had mentioned something to that effect when speaking about the ivory knife in the Night Temple.

He told Sunny that one had to spill blood on the black altar, to receive a Memory of the blade that rested on its surface.

But the obsidian knife did no such thing. It just remained in his hand, as material and palpable as one could imagine.

What was even stranger, though…

Was that the knife didn't appear to have a spellweave. It was, without a doubt, a magical item. Sunny could feel that it was, even if he didn't know what properties that entailed. However, when he looked beneath the surface of the knife, he didn't see the familiar pattern of ethereal strings weaving themselves around anchoring lights.

What he saw instead was just brilliant radiance, as though the knife was filled to the brim with soul essence. And in that radiance was just a single string…

It wasn't the same type of ethereal string, though.

It was a…

Sunny frowned.

A String of Fate.

A single String of Fate was somehow placed inside the obsidian knife, folding on itself endlessly, with its two ends connected to create a perfect, neverending circle.

Sunny stared at the strange String for a while, and then furrowed his brow.

'...Now, what is that all about?'

Chapter-474: Truth Be Told

Sunny studied the obsidian knife for a while, and concluded that he had no idea what this thing was supposed to be capable of. It wasn't a Memory, and it didn't have a weave, so neither the Spell nor his own ability to perceive and somewhat understand such things could help him.

The only thing Sunny knew for certain was that someone had plucked a string from the tapestry of Fate and placed it inside the knife, making a circle out of it… for some mysterious purpose.

Everything else was going to have to wait until the next time he heard from Mordret. The lost prince was bound to know more about the obsidian knife, since he seemed to know a lot about the Chained Isles and their past in general.

Now, however, Sunny had to deal with another problem…

He had to explain the disappearance of the knife to the White Feather clan, somehow.

Come morning — or at any moment, really, if someone decided to leave the Dream Realm or entered it in the middle of the night — people would become aware that the knife that no one had been able to lift or move was now gone.

Sunny had no doubt that it was not going to take a long time for them to figure out that it was him who had taken it.

And after that...

'What to do, what to do…'

In the end, he came up with a really crazy idea. Something that he would have never even considered, in normal circumstances.

Something that went against his very nature.

…He went and told Master Roan the truth.

Well, the part that had to do with the miraculous coins, to be precise.

Visiting the White Feather compound in the middle of the night was a bit strange, but luckily for him, the older man turned out to be up. He was preparing to leave on a patrol, and so rose early to make the necessary preparations.

After Sunny was done talking, the mighty griffin rider stared at him for a while with a perplexed expression. Then, he asked to take a look at the knife.

Sunny reluctantly handed the obsidian blade over and watched nervously as Master Roan inspected it. He was really hoping that the White Feather clan would not decide to keep it… there were very few things Sunny could do if they did.

Finally, the strapping Master returned the obsidian knife to him and asked curiously:

"So you managed to lift it by using Noctis coins on the altar?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah… wait, you know about the coins?"

Master Roan nodded.

"A few have been found here and there on the Isles over the years. It seems that this was the preferred currency people who lived here thousands of years ago used. No one had ever discovered a literal treasure trove of them, though, as you did."

He thought for a bit, and then smiled.

"Actually, I think I have one stashed somewhere. Wait here for a bit, alright?"

With that, Roan disappeared into the stone chateau, and then

returned ten or so minutes later, holding a familiar golden coin in his hand.

"Found it! I used to carry it with me a lot before, as a lucky charm. Let's go."

Together, they returned to the altar island.

The first thing Master Roan did was glance at the moon, and then place the coin on the altar. Once again, it gleamed and disappeared, leaving a bewildered expression on the handsome man's face.

"I'll be damned! I just received a bit of soul essence. You were right!"

He shook his head in astonishment.

"To think that these coins had such a use all this time, and no one was the wiser. Good job, Sunless!"

Then, Master Roan hesitated for a few moments, and asked:

"Can you place the knife back on the altar?"

Sunny did as he was asked, and then watched as the mighty griffin rider used all of his formidable power in a vain attempt to lift the obsidian blade off the white surface. When he was done with that futile attempt and stepped back to catch his breath, Sunny simply took hold of the handle and retrieved the knife without any problem.

"Interesting!"

Then came the moment of truth. Sunny tensed as he waited for the older man's decision.

After thinking about it for a while, Master Roan said:

"Well… I don't know if you know this, Sunless, but there is a sacred rule among us Awakened in the Dream Realm. The sanctity of this rule is unassailable and beyond reproach. And that rule is… finders, keepers."

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

The strapping Master grinned:

"So you don't have to worry about either me or Tyris taking that knife from you…"

Then, however, his smile dimmed.

"...Other people, though, might not be as reasonable. Even if no one knows what power this thing has, or if there even is anything special about it, someone might get too excited and act in a regrettable manner. So I'd advise you to put the knife back on the altar, until the time you feel like using it."

Sunny considered his words and had to admit that this, indeed, would be the best decision for now. Master Roan helped him confirm that no one else would be able to take the knife, and carrying it around before venturing into the Nightmare had no benefit.

Summoning the memory of how exactly the obsidian blade had been placed on the altar, he put it in its previous spot and took a step back.

Master Roan nodded.

"Good choice. Please, do tell us if you find out anything about its purpose… at least if it has anything to do with the well-being of the Sanctuary. If need be, we'll compensate you fairly to either take the knife off your hands or lend it for a bit, if that's what you prefer."

Sunny agreed to this condition, since it sounded reasonable.

With that out of the way, the strapping griffin rider looked at him with sparks dancing in his eyes.

"So, uh… what are you going to do now?"

Sunny frowned.

'What a weird question…'

"Go home, take a shower, deal with some real-world business. Why? What are you going to do?"

Master Roan laughed:

"What do you mean, what I am going to do? I am going to go on my patrol, and then I'll go… coin hunting, of course. I suspect that everyone in the Sanctuary is going to be searching for Noctis coins like madmen for quite some time after that discovery of yours. People are going to get really busy…"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, and then said in a very serious tone:

"Good luck, then. Oh, and one thing… if you find a big chest full of them, make your griffin stomp on it a few times before coming closer. Better yet, do that to every chest you encounter in the future. Never trust a chest not to eat you, is what I am trying to say… I sure won't!"

With that, he said goodbye to the handsome Master, placed his hand on the altar, and returned to the real world.

There was a lot he had to do there…

Chapter-475: A Few Things To Do

Some time later, Sunny was in his kitchen, eating the breakfast he had just prepared. He was thinking of all the things on his to-do list.

They were, in no particular order: selling the soul shards he had brought with him from the Dream Realm, and setting up a stable method to sell more in the future; returning to the Dreamscape to participate in duels on the professional arenas to practice Shadow Dance and feed the Mantle of the Underworld with victories; observing Rain and thinking of a way to deal with that whole situation; learning how to properly fight with a spear; visiting Neph; writing a report about the Noctis coins for Teacher Julius.

There were probably more things he had to do, but was forgetting. But he already had enough on his plate.

Finishing the breakfast and staring toward the door of the guest bedroom, where Effie still slept while her spirit wandered the Dream Realm, he shook his head and went out to sit on the porch as he drank some delicious tea.

It was early morning. Sunny enjoyed the pleasant view of the terrace district, watched as Rain walked to the public transport hub on her way to school, and then activated his communicator.

He was going to start with the simplest of tasks.

Navigating to the market section of the network, he habitually input his identification number to access the Awakened section of it. Sunny had browsed the wares there before, even if back then he barely had enough money to buy anything.

Today, however, things were different. Today, he was approaching

the network as a seller, not as a buyer.

Sunny entered "soul shards" as the keywords and stared at the listings, appreciating the number of zeroes in their prices. It seemed as though the value of shards was not uniform… of course, the higher Rank shards cost much more. But people, strangely, also seemed to care about what Nightmare Creature the crystal came from, and how it had been defeated.

'What the hell?'

Apparently, there were… collectors among the wealthy mundane humans who were very interested in this sort of thing. Some superstitious Awakened also believed, for some reason, that absorbing "bad" shards would be detrimental to the purity of their souls.

'Weirdos…'

Sunny didn't know a lot of things, but one thing he did know was that there was not a single Awakened out there with a pure soul. Even the best of them were murderers by nature, and their hearts were painted black by the nightmares they had experienced.

Not to mention that there were no bad or good soul shards. They were all pretty much the same, coming from terrible monsters and earned through bloodshed.

Anyway, that was something he was going to consider when creating his own listing.

After getting the gist of the pricing, Sunny opened the form to create his own digital shop. Without thinking too much, he named it "Brilliant Emporium" and went on to fill out the entire form.

Then, it came the time to put his soul shards into the auction. Sunny wrote simply:

"Four soul shards coming from a Fallen Devil, Mordant Mimic. The creature was killed and eaten by the proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium himself. Before that, the Mordant Mimic had been pretending to be a treasure chest and devouring those lured by the

promise of treasure. In the end, it bit off more than it could chew."

Satisfied with that, he finalized the listing and stared at it for a bit, as if expecting someone to bid instantly.

However, nothing of the sort happened.

With a sigh, Sunny deactivated the communicator and went back inside.

'Soon… I will be rich soon…'

***

It took several days for all four of his soul shards to sell. After that, Sunny had to arrange secure delivery, which was somewhat of a headache on its own. Overall, the process took too much time from his already packed schedule.

He also felt that he was missing some crucial knowledge on how to make his business really boom. Even though the product he was trying to sell was first class — there were not a lot of Fallen Rank soul shards out there, compared to Dormant and Awakened ones — the bidding had not really taken off. He did make a sizable amount of money, but not as sizable as it could have been.

Still, it was enough to purchase a couple of cheap lower Rank Memories. Sunny simply looked for the most useless ones, which no one else would ever want to buy, and made the minimum offer. Whoever it was selling them must have been happy beyond belief to finally be rid of these things.

Sunny was going to feed the Memories to Saint immediately after receiving them, but before that, he spent a lot of time training with the Cruel Sight in his underground dojo.

He had a solid understanding of how to use a short sword, but a spear was an alien beast to him. Even though Sunny knew the basic rules of combat technique and could perform somewhat effectively while wielding any weapon, he was far, far away from mastering them.

How fortunate it was then, that he had a renowned spear master — Raised by Wolves herself — crashing in his guest bedroom.

Granted, she couldn't really spar with him due to her condition. But he had Saint for that.

In the end, the three of them spent a lot of time in his basement. Effie was observing and explaining to him what to do, how to do it, and most importantly, what not to do. Saint served as his opponent and the mighty enemy to polish his nascent skill against. And Sunny… Sunny found himself once again in the role of a willing punching bag.

It was just like in that week they had spent in the hidden chamber of the ruined cathedral in the Dark City. Sunny even got nostalgic, remembering how cozy and nice things had been back then.

Now, however, things were much better. Not only was there an unlimited amount of delicious food they could eat during the breaks in his training, there were even medicine and ice baths to ease the pain in his bruised and beaten body.

Training with Saint was really effective, but she really didn't know how to pull her punches!

Just like that, a few days passed.

And then, something that Sunny had been dreading for a while finally, and inevitably, happened.

…It was time to accompany Kai to the premier of the Song of Light and Darkness.

Chapter-476: A Song of Light and Darkness

Some time later, Sunny was pondering his life choices while sitting in the back row of a crowded theater. The lights were already off, which obviously meant nothing to him. People seemed to be really excited to see the movie, though… especially Effie, who was to his side, munching on something called popcorn and staring at the screen.

In the darkness, somber music started to play, reverberating through the entire space and making the audience shiver. Effie suddenly jabbed her elbow into his ribs.

"Do you know who is the composer for this thing? It's Griffin! I don't know how they managed to get him, but he scored the entire movie. Such an honor! Can you believe it?"

Sunny had no idea who this Griffin guy was, but judging by Effie's reaction, he was someone famous. Massaging his ribs with a grimace, Sunny offered a stifled answer:

"I can."

On the screen, the interior of a spacious and beautifully lit room appeared. A small girl with silver hair was playing on a carpet, while a handsome man with dark circles under his eyes was shown studying a map.

'What the hell…'

Was that supposed to be Nephis? If so, her hair should have been black. It only turned silver after her First Nightmare.

Effie giggled.

"So cute!"

The girl, meanwhile, approached the table and reached to touch the strange sword that lay on it. The blade of the sword was short and misshapen, as though shattered a long time ago.

Before the girl could cut herself, though, the man lifted the sword and brought it out of her reach.

"This is not a toy, Nephis!"

Sunny palmed his face and grimaced.

"But, daddy… why is your sword broken?"

The man smiled.

"So what if it is broken? It is still sharp."

Then, he put his hand on the girl's shoulder and looked at her with a very serious expression:

"One day you will wield a sword too, darling. When you do, remember one thing: we, Awakened, only raise arms to protect humanity. As long as we don't give up, no matter how dire the situation is, there will be hope. Just like this sword, humanity is more resilient than it seems!'

Sunny tilted his head.

'Wait, this doesn't even make sense…'

The scene, however, was already over. The screen turned black for a few moments, and the movie transitioned into the future. Nephis — now a languid jade beauty with a slim waist, generous figure, long eyelashes, and mesmerizing grey eyes — was entering the Academy.

What followed was a long training montage showing her defeating every other Sleeper there with a training sword, all the while offering words of wisdom.

Like "never give up hope", or "remember your duty", or "we are

humans!".

The propaganda was so tacky and laid so thick Sunny couldn't help but cringe.

The only person the jade beauty couldn't defeat was a handsome young man with masculine features, broad shoulders, and a noble bearing… Han Li Caster.

'Oh, no. Oh, no…'

Sunny should have guessed by the invitation Kai had given him, but the director of the movie was obviously hinting at the nascent romantic feelings between the two. Their conversations in the Academy seemed to be about swordsmanship, but were also somehow deeply flirtatious.

The actors had mad chemistry together.

He wanted to vomit, but the audience was clearly enthralled by the two leads.

Sunny didn't dwell on this preposterous thing for long, though… because right about then, his own character was introduced.

'What the Spell is this?!'

The actor hired to play him… was a literal child! It was a teenage boy of about thirteen years of age, with a mischievous grin and a face that, for lack of better words, simply begged to be punched. Worse than that, he was shown as extremely uneducated, clumsy, and naive.

In short… Sunny was the comic relief!

He turned to Effie in outrage, only to see her laughing silently.

"Oh, man… who's the casting director for this movie, I need to send them flowers!"

Even his shadows were laughing. Both of them!

Sunny gritted his teeth, promised to exact revenge on Kai and Effie

for making him endure this, and turned back to the screen.

Finally, Nephis entered the Dream Realm and found herself on the Forgotten Shore. The coral labyrinth and the dark sea were recreated with such detail that he couldn't help but shiver.

'Well… they did their research, at least!'

The audience was holding their breaths during Neph's journey to the Dark City. The terrifying nature of the dark tides and the deadly battles with Awakened Nightmare Creatures populating the Labyrinth created a truly tense, suffocating atmosphere.

Of course, everyone knew that the main character was not going to die in the first half of the movie. But that's where Sunny — as well as Cassie — came into play. Just as he had expected, the movie showed them as a burden that had to be carried by Nephis on her heroic journey. But since very few people knew who Sunny was, his fate was uncertain.

Nephis was bound to survive, but what about her friends?

And, thanks to his character, there were also moments of pleasant levity amidst all the tension. A few times, the whole audience exploded with laughter after Sunny on the screen did something especially stupid or said something really outrageous.

He had also slowly developed a catchphrase. It was… "Are you crazy?!"

That not only allowed the audience to chuckle, but also gave Nephis the opportunity to educate her worthless follower, thus naturally delivering a lot of necessary exposition.

The real Sunny wasn't amused, though. Because they weren't laughing with him… they were laughing at him.

'Idiots! What do you even know?'

They didn't know anything...

Since no one really knew what the three of them had gone through

on their way to the Dark City, the writer simply came up with some dire dangers for Nephis to overcome.

Eventually, though, they made it to the ancient city, and met Effie.

Effie was played by a very tall, athletic, and attractive actress.

…The way she played her, though, was a sight to behold. Basically, the actress went out of her way to portray the huntress as a charismatic, but not very bright savage who was all brawn and no brain. All she knew how to do was fight, eat, and break things.

Sunny turned to Effie and grinned, full of malice and gloating.

This was the first time he had ever seen the boisterous young woman... completely mortified.

"Casting director, you say? I think I'll send them flowers, too."

Chapter-477: Standing Ovation

After Nephis reached the Dark City and the huntress was introduced, both Sunny and Effie watched the rest of the movie with bleak expressions.

The second act took place in the outer settlement, and was dedicated to Neph's heroic attempts to protect and inspire the young men and women trapped there. There were a lot of impassioned speeches, blood-chilling expeditions into the Dark City, and tense altercations with Gunlaug's forces.

There were also a lot of shenanigans from young Sunny, to the delight of the audience. At some point, people started to scream "Are you crazy?!" along with him. And a bit later, there was a sort of comical moment of growth for the character, when he asked "...Am I crazy?" instead and went along with Nephis without offering his usual critique, which was met with cheers.

…Most of this part of the movie, though, was dedicated to the genuine respect and camaraderie that blossomed between Nephis and Caster in this dire time. With the handsome male lead as her right hand, Changing Star successfully united the people of the outer settlement, reminded them what it meant to be humans, and challenged Gunlaug to save boisterous Effie from unjust imprisonment.

The duel itself was choreographed somewhat well, even if it had nothing to do with the real thing. The moves both the radiant heroine and the cruel tyrant used were flashy and dramatic, and expressed the mood well, but anyone trying to actually fight like that would probably risk having their enemy die of laughter.

The third act showed the siege of the Crimson Spire, the heroic stand of the warriors of the first line and Effie, Kai's battle in the skies with the Spire Messengers, and Neph and Caster fighting back to back,

slaying dozens and dozens of Nightmare Creatures together.

The audience seemed to have forgotten to breathe, and even Sunny had to admit that the battle scene was filmed especially well, showcasing the chaos, horror, and terrible toll of human lives that such a massacre was bound to reap. Many side characters that people had already grown to love died heroically, and he even heard a few sobs coming from the darkness.

Enhanced by the beautiful music, the atmosphere was not tragic, though. On the contrary, it was triumphant and exalted, as if to die in this way was the highest honor a human could receive.

A bit uncomfortable, Sunny shifted in his seat.

'That Griffin guy really knows how to make a tune…'

When the situation was the most desperate, with the dark water rising and threatening to drown all the surviving warriors, a sudden change happened. The sea suddenly retreated, and the monsters started to fall to the ground. Caster, covered in blood and wounds, looked at Nephis and whispered:

"My Lady! The sun…"

Indeed, the sun had suddenly turned menacingly red, its light eradicating the remaining Nightmare Creatures and assaulting the humans. For the first time in the entire movie, an uncertain and desperate expression appeared on Changing Star's face.

Salvation came from someone who the audience would have never expected to see do something so profound — a clear ringing of the bell resounded in the air, and the small figure of clumsy, useless Sunny could be seen near the tower, waving his hand in the air.

The survivors rushed toward the Crimson Spire and entered inside.

There, Nephis looked up, and then turned to Sunny.

"Someone has to stall the Terror so that everyone could escape. I will do battle with that nightmare, but there's an important task you must complete. Lead all these people to the Gateway!"

Sunny on the screen looked at Changing Star with fear:

"Lady Nephis… are you crazy? I am just a clumsy kid from the outskirts. How can you entrust something so important to someone like me?"

Sunny in the real world suppressed an infuriated groan. People in the audience, though, were rather emotional:

"You can do it, Sunny!"

"You got this, kid!"

"You're a great scout, don't sell yourself short!"

On the screen, the beautiful actress playing Nephis looked down on the comical, slightly pathetic boy in front of her and put her hand on his shoulder.

"We, Awakened, must rise to the occasion to protect humanity. As long as we don't give up, no matter how dire the situation is, there will be hope. I believe in you, Sunny. You are capable of much more than you think!"

With that, she left the survivors and went off to fight the Terror, while Sunny guided everyone to the Gateway. And somewhere in the process, Caster left the group to aid Changing Star in battle.

The last scenes of the movie cut between the hundred survivors fighting their way to the Gateway and the tragic duo battling the terrifying creature at the top of the Spire.

Many people in the audience were crying, knowing full well that neither of them was going to return to the real world.

In the end, Caster heroically sacrificed himself to protect Nephis, breaking the hearts of so many viewers. The survivors found the Gateway and escaped seconds before it was destroyed.

The last shot showed bloodied Neph walking out of the tower, holding a broken sword in her hand.

As she gazed at the Forgotten Shore, a lone tear rolled down her cheek.

"As long as we don't give up… there is hope."

The screen turned black, and in the next moment, the audience exploded with applause.

Sunny stared at all those people, many of them applauding with tears in their eyes, with a strange expression on his face.

'Did they… actually like that crap?'

He turned to Effie, lingered for a moment, and asked:

"Uh… did you like it?"

The former huntress gave him a long look.

Then, she said:

"What am I, an idiot? Of course I didn't like it. It's such a piece of crap!"

Sunny exhaled with relief.

At least there was one other sane person in this theater…

Chapter-478: Credit Where Credit is Due

After the movie was over, Kai appeared to deafening applause and gave a short speech, congratulating the director and the crew of the movie and then inviting them on the stage for a short Q&A.

Sunny stared at the director of this travesty, seriously considering silently assassinating him for a few moments. Then, he glanced at Effie, who — judging by her face — was thinking the same.

He lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"What do you want to do?"

The young woman inhaled deeply, turned to him, and smiled.

"...I am hungry. Let's go eat."

Together, they snuck out of the screening hall and went to find the theater's restaurant.

There were a lot of people there who, just like them, had decided to skip the PR portion of the event and were now enjoying food and drinks, discussing the movie with lively expressions. Sunny and Effie got themselves something to eat and sat at an empty table, then grew quiet for a while. Each was preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Now that Sunny had a little time to digest the movie, his anger subsided a bit. In fact, he was even happy.

Sure, the way he was portrayed in the story was as far from the truth as it could have been, and more than a little bit humiliating. But… in a way, this was exactly what he needed.

Now that Nephis had become his master, he didn't have to hide his strength and True Name that much. But he still preferred to remain in the shadows — not only because there was a possibility of becoming masterless again, but also because it was the best way to be in the world so full of hidden dangers and powerful enemies.

Being renowned would make a lot of things difficult for him, and make every battle he fought after that harder. After all, there was no better advantage than being underestimated by the enemy.

From that point of view, the ridiculous way in which he was portrayed in the movie was a blessing. It made the possibility of anyone thinking highly of him that much lower. Of course, not everyone was going to watch that travesty, but many would, and their opinion was going to spread.

Who would believe that Changing Star's bumbling sidekick was, in fact, one of the most dangerous Awakened alive, and thus consider him as a serious threat?

...Pretty much no one.

So, in fact, the director of the Song of Light and Darkness unintentionally did him a favor.

Satisfied with that conclusion, Sunny looked around. He saw several people looking at Effie with stunned expressions, clearly gathering their courage to come and introduce themselves. But no one had, yet.

He could hear their whispers, though:

"Look! It's her, Raised by Wolves!"

"Oh, my!"

"I heard about her situation, but to actually see... She is so brave!"

Effie herself was strangely quiet. She ignored the whispers, then looked at him and asked:

"Hey, Sunny. Can I ask you something?"

Sensing that this was not going to be a simple question, he tensed a little, and then said:

"Sure. What is it?"

Effie hesitated for a few moments, then lowered her voice, so that no one would be able to overhear:

"Did Caster really leave to help Nephis?"

'Ah…'

Sunny stared at his friend for a bit, then shook his head.

"...No. He left to make sure that she dies."

Effie inhaled deeply.

"...I see."

She didn't continue that conversation, as though his answer confirmed something that she had already suspected.

Well… despite her often boorish demeanor and the way she was portrayed in the movie, Effie was anything but stupid. In fact, she was extremely intelligent, cool-headed, and cunning — otherwise, she would have never survived for three long years alone on the streets of the Dark City.

It was only natural for her to have suspicions, considering how much she knew.

Luckily, Effie did not ask anything else.

…Mostly because of a strange man who entered the restaurant, looked around, noticed their table, and walked over with gleaming eyes.

'Oh no… another fan of Raised by Wolves…'

The man stopped in front of them, glanced at Effie, and then turned to Sunny with an awed expression:

"A… are you Awakened Sunless?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

"Uh… yes?"

A bright smile appeared on the man's face.

"Oh my! Oh, goodness! It is such an honor! I am such a huge fan of yours!"

'What is happening?!'

Sunny stared at the beaming man, trying to comprehend what he was saying. Misjudging his expression, the man hurriedly said:

"Oh, sorry! I was so nervous that I forgot to introduce myself. I am a writer… in fact, it was I who wrote the screenplay for A Song of Light and Darkness. And it's all… all thanks to you!"

Effie stared at Sunny with an expression that didn't promise him anything good and asked in a sweet voice:

"Oh? All thanks to him, really? How come?"

'...I'm in trouble!'

The man's smile grew even wider.

"Exploration Report on the Forgotten Shore! Ah, it is such a brilliant piece of academic work. I based most of my research on your profound work, Awakened Sunless! Everyone on the crew and everyone in the cast read it at least once. I even insisted on giving you the co-writer credit, but sadly, it was impossible… you know, due to you not being a member of the screenwriter's guild. But fret not!

I'll let everyone know that if it weren't for you, this movie wouldn't exist!"

Sunny stared at the man with wide eyes, and then said in a weak voice:

"Please, don't…"

But it was of no use.

"Ah, you are so humble! So modest! Well, of course, what else would I expect from a researcher as talented as you? But it wouldn't be right for me to receive all the praise… no, people must know…"

He looked at the restaurant and proclaimed, not even trying to keep his voice down:

"...that it is you, Awakened Sunless, who they must thank for being able to enjoy our wonderful film!"

Sunny looked at the floor.

'I guess I am going to have to kill Kai. Or wait, no. Actually, that probably makes us even after the whole Mongrel disaster...'

Chapter-479: Delegation

Luckily for Sunny, Kai was finished with his business soon, and they were able to leave the theater for a more private space.

…Otherwise, there might have been civilian casualties at the premier of the Song of Light of Darkness. After that damn writer had announced Sunny's identity to everyone in the restaurant, the amount of people asking him to say "Are you crazy?!" to their faces almost pushed him to the brink.

In any case, soon he found himself in a sophisticated lounge in the company of Effie, Kai, and Aiko. The petite girl looked very sharp in a fashionable business suit and radiated a sense of cold professionalism that made people think twice before approaching laidback and friendly Kai… which, Sunny supposed, was a big part of being an idol's manager.

When they were seated, the idol in question gave them a guilty look.

"Well… uh… it wasn't that bad, was it?"

Effie smiled at him, and said sweetly:

"Sure, sure! But also, the only reason you're still alive is that it would be a chore to clean the blood off my wheelchair."

Kai chuckled nervously and glanced at Sunny:

"What about you?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I don't mind. Actually, I am happy to be portrayed as a bumbling fool."

The charming archer blinked.

"Really?"

Sunny gave him a serious nod.

"Of course! It's easier to fool people who think that you're the fool. So… I don't mind."

Kai looked away in embarrassment.

"Anyway… you don't have to worry too much, really. These types of films are usually made to boost public morale. No one is really going to take them seriously. Even mundane people understand the difference between reality and fiction when it comes to the Awakened."

Sunny laughed.

"Sure. When they want to."

He was a mundane person for most of his life too, after all. And even though he grew up in the outskirts, he used to consume cheap entertainment just like everyone else in the waking world. Yes, he knew how to recognize propaganda and what to not take seriously, but at the same time, many things that had nothing to do with the truth found their way into his mind and silently became beliefs.

That was how well-engineered falsehoods worked.

They spent some time chatting and joking about especially ridiculous moments in the movie, and at the right moment, Sunny said:

"By the way… I talked to Cassie. She's in. But we'll need to do it before winter, so minus one month for preparations."

Effie smiled.

"Good news! I'll start packing, then. I am south of Bastion right now, so it will take me… two, three months to get to the Chained Isles? Unless one of you knows a friendly local Saint."

Sunny thought about Saint Tyris, and remained silent.

No, that woman frightened him too much to ask for a favor. He wondered how Master Jet had managed to convince her, in the first place.

Kai nodded.

"We can meet in Bastion and travel north together. It will be safer."

Aiko, meanwhile, was looking at them with a confused expression on her delicate face.

"Travel north? Do it before winter? What are you talking about?"

A guilty expression suddenly appeared on the charming archer's face.

"That… uh… I haven't mentioned it before. But, basically, I am going to join Sunny, Effie, and Cassie to… to challenge the Second Nightmare."

Aiko stared at him with a shocked expression.

"Not to steal from Sunny, but… are you crazy?! Have you told the agency?"

Kai smiled weakly.

"...No? I was hoping that you would tell them, actually. They'll listen to you! Isn't it a good thing, really? For public relations. Plus, as a Master, I won't have to visit the Dream Realm every day."

The petite girl scoffed.

"If you survive!"

Then, she glanced at Sunny and Effie, and shook her head.

"Ah, who am I kidding… I guess I'll be jobless again, soon. You guys have fun for a bit, I'll go get a drink."

With that, she rose and went toward the bar.

Sunny thought for a bit, then rose, too.

"I'll go keep her company."

Kai gave him a thankful smile.

"I appreciate it."

'What does he think I am going to do?'

Sunny gave his friend a confused look, then followed Aiko.

Of course, he wasn't doing it out of consideration. In fact, he wanted to talk to her about something in private.

When he approached the bar and stood near the petite girl, she gave him a dirty look.

"Whatever it is, no. Hell no..."

Sunny blinked.

"What do you mean?"

Aiko smiled crookedly.

"I know that look of yours. The last time you looked at me like that, Stev and I almost ended up as the Blood Lord bait. What, do you want me to join your suicide crusade?"

He shook his head.

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. In fact, it's about your job…"

The petite girl raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Sunny nodded.

"Well, since there's a possibility of you losing a part of your income, and Kai tells me that you are really good at managing stuff... how would you like to help me manage a blossoming new business?"

Aiko looked at him with a dubious expression.

"Are you opening an assassination agency?"

He almost choked.

"What? What made you think that? No, I just found a way to move items between the real world and the Dream Realm. My dream, if you need to know, is to become the proprietor of an elite Memory store…."

The petite girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"...Really?"

Sunny frowned.

"Yes, really! Why, can't I have a dream? Just imagine, sitting safely in a fashionably decorated store without having to risk my skin in the Dream Realm, and have tons of money simply flow into my hands. That's the stuff dreams are made of, is it not?"

Aiko shook her head with a bewildered expression on her face.

"I guess?"

Sunny smiled.

"You understand! The others might think that it's silly, but I know you wouldn't, as a former business owner yourself. Anyway, I won't have a large enough arsenal of Memories for a while, but I can start creating a reputation for the store already. A brand name, or whatever it's called. So I just sold four Fallen soul shards on the network, from a devil I killed… and ate.

But for some reason, that bastard's shards did not fetch a really good price…"

Aiko looked at him with a frown.

"Well… what category of the vendor license did you apply for? Who's your appraiser? What's your feature strategy? SEO approach? Pool of endorsements?"

He remained silent for a bit, then said:

"...You see, you said a lot of words, and most of them even sound familiar, but I have no idea what you mean."

'What the hell was she talking about? What's a SEO? Are there different licenses? Wait, do I even need a license? Don't tell me that I need to pay taxes, too...'

The petite girl closed her eyes for a moment.

"None? You did none of these things?"

Sunny nodded.

"It's a miracle that you even managed to sell those shards!"

He smiled.

"That's why I need someone smart and resourceful like you to help me! For te… five percent commission of every sale. Just think about it. How many Awakened out there can bring soul shards to the real world, and bring spices to the Dream Realm? We'll be rich in no time!"

Aiko sighed and remained silent for a bit.

Then, she said:

"That is a high-risk business venture that wholly depends on two unpredictable factors — you staying alive and you continuously hunting down Nightmare Creatures, which are usually in contradiction to each other. So in normal circumstances, I would have said no. But… it is you, I guess.

Plus, you have a good relationship with all three of the newest Named Awakened, as well as a lot of prestige as a member of Changing Star's cohort. And now even some pop culture fame…"

Aiko shrugged, thought for a long while, and then said categorically:

"Ten percent."

Sunny grinned and offered her his hand for a handshake.

"Perfect! Welcome aboard Sunny's Brilliant Emporium!"

The petite girl stared at him in shock.

"Wait… you actually named the store Brilliant Emporium?! Can the naming be changed?!"

He shook his head.

"No. It's non-negotiable. But what's wrong with that name? It's a great name! I think that it's… you know... brilliant…"

Chapter-480: Busy Schedule

After that night, Sunny became really busy.

'Delegating… that's the secret of success.'

That was his thought after Aiko joined the Brilliant Emporium as a manager. With her help, he went through all the necessary paperwork to make his improvised network store seem legit. Sunny noticed the difference right after listing the soul shards he had gathered from the inhabitants of the Sanctuary for sale.

Not only did they got purchased much faster, but the price was also pleasantly higher than expected.

He also didn't need to spend a lot of his severely lacking time on managing sales, delivery, and purchases. Aiko streamlined the process and created a simple and efficient system where he handed her the inventory and the updated information on what items the Awakened wanted to receive from him in the Dream Realm, and she did the rest.

While its volume of sales was not overwhelming, the Brilliant Emporium started functioning as a real business with a constant level of activity and a slowly growing client base. Sunny just had to collect the money and spend it on low-tier Memories to feed to Saint.

Well, and remain alive while getting the soul shards, of course.

Sadly, despite how appreciative of the concept of delegating he became, this was the only part of his busy life that he could entrust to someone else. All the other things he had to do were either too personal, or too secretive to recruit anyone to help.

No one was going to do his research for him, so Sunny had to spend time writing reports, bringing them to Teacher Julius, and working

with the old man to make them worthy of being rewarded with contribution points. Nothing had brought him quite as much as the Forgotten Shore report had, but the points were slowly accumulating.

Similarly, now that Cassie was gone on a long expedition, he was the only one of Neph's friends — of which there were only two, really — who could visit her. That was not a burden, but took away some of his time nevertheless.

He also kept an eye on the runes describing her status, and saw the number of soul fragments in her possession increase at a frightening speed almost every day. Sunny didn't know where Nephis was and what she was doing, what kinds of enemies she was fighting, but they must have been as powerful as they were ample in numbers.

He had to keep up.

Now that he had received a vast boost to his power through sacrificing the miraculous coins to the white altar in the Sanctuary of Noctis, less than four hundred fragments stood between him and being able to create a third core.

That meant that he had to continue venturing into the wilderness of the Chained Isles to hunt down Nightmare Creatures. Armed with the Cruel Sight and the ability to infuse its blade with either invisible soul damage or radiant divine flame, he was now able to go further than he had before, and challenge creatures that previously he chose to avoid.

Their deaths rewarded him with shadow fragments, while their bodies gifted him soul shards that were then sold and converted into Memories, and through those, into shadow fragments as well, this time for Saint to consume. It was a virtuous, but exhausting and wildly dangerous cycle.

And as if the pressure of having to keep up with Changing Star wasn't enough, he also had to continue training, both with the spear — with the help of Effie and his taciturn demon — and without it, to practice Shadow Dance.

That second task, however, had turned out to be much harder than

Sunny expected.

Before plunging back into the Dreamscape, he decided to be careful and check what the situation with Mongrel was. A quick search on the network could tell him if everyone had forgotten about the masked swordsmen or not.

And as it turned out… they did not.

To Sunny's dismay, he found out that in the month of his absence, the people infatuated with Mongrel had not only persisted in their excitement, but also brought it to a whole new, truly ridiculous level.

All of them were flooding the network with theories and discussions, and countless individuals — even those who missed out on the initial sensation — were waiting with bated breaths for one glorious moment.

The return of Lord Mongrel!

With each day that passed, their anticipation only grew stronger.

No matter how discrete Sunny could be, once he appeared in the Dreamscape, it was going to create too much noise and attract too much attention.

'Damn it all! What a disaster!'

He was on verge of pulling his hair out in despair. It was worth remembering that the persona of Mongrel — oh irony! — had been created to help him stay anonymous, potentially in order to safely glean secrets about the sovereigns in the future.

What a joke it was, that the faceless phantom he created ended up being much more famous and recognizable than its creator.

In any case, the situation was seriously messing up Sunny's plans. He simply couldn't use Dreamscape, which caused his progress with Shadow Dance — and the Mantle of the Underworld — to stall.

And if that wasn't enough, there was another unexpected problem he encountered. That one wasn't as inconvenient and pernicious, but

made him worry a lot, for whatever reason.

It was that Sunny had not heard from Mordret again after returning from the Ivory Tower.

Despite the fact that several weeks had passed, the lost prince remained gone. Sunny's head, once again, had only one voice resounding in it — his own. Usually, that would have been a good sign, but Mordret's absence made Sunny tense and full of vaguely bad premonitions.

What could have happened to his mysterious helper? Was he simply unable to establish contact outside of the Sky Below and the Ivory Island, or had something happened to him?

There was no answer.

Sunny even took out the mirror shard from the Covetous Coffer and smeared a few drops of blood on it, to no result whatsoever. The piece of mirror remained the same — absolutely dark and refusing to reflect anything.

It was after one of these fruitless attempts that Sunny left Effie to enjoy the dinner he had cooked for them by herself and went out to sit on the porch in a dark mood.

It was early evening, and shadows were slowly growing longer and deeper. Maybe because of his exhaustion, or maybe because of how used he was to being safe in his home, but Sunny got consumed by thoughts and lost track of his surroundings... something that rarely happened.

…That was why he was so shocked to hear someone's voice just a few meters away.

"...What are you staring at?"

Sunny blinked a few times, then focused his sight on the person who had addressed him.

In front of him, at a bit of distance, just between the sidewalk and the path leading to his porch, stood a fourteen-year-old girl in a school

uniform, with black hair and dark eyes… and a very unamused expression on her pale face.

Sunny's chest grew cold.

'Crap!'

It was Rain.

Looking right at Sunny, she sighed and repeated:

"I said what are you staring at... brat?"

Chapter-481: First Meeting

'What is she doing here?! Why is she talking to me?!'

Although Sunny was panicking on the inside, none of the emotions reflected on his face. Armed with the extensive experience of deceit, manipulation, and facing terrifying Nightmare Creatures in melee, he kept a straight face, threw a dark look at Rain, and calmly said:

"I am not staring at anything. And who are you calling a brat, you brat? Respect your elders!"

The girl scoffed.

"What elders? You're obviously younger than me!"

Sunny opened his eyes wide in outrage.

'...Ouch.'

He knew that he looked younger than his age, but to be mistaken for a middle schooler… that was just too much!

It was getting dark, so maybe that was the reason for her mistake.

Rain, meanwhile, was not done speaking:

"And you were definitely staring at me, with a very nasty expression. I almost tripped! Didn't your parents teach you not to stare?"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it again. Then opened it once more.

"First of all, I am eighteen. Second, I was just zoning out and thinking about stuff… adult stuff that a youngster like you would not even understand! And lastly, my parents taught me all they needed to teach me, but what do they have to do with any of this? They're not

here!"

Rain mockingly raised an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah? You live in this big house all alone?"

Sunny furrowed his brow.

"Not only do I live in this house alone, I also own it!"

…But right at that moment, Effie suddenly shouted from inside:

"Sunny! Come eat, dinner is getting cold!"

He froze, then felt the tips of his ears growing hot.

'Damn it, Effie!'

"Uh… that's a guest of mine. She's staying over… for reasons."

Rain stared at him for a few moments with a funny expression on her face, then asked:

"Your name is Sunny?"

Sunny shrugged, trying to appear as indifferent as possible.

"Sure. Why?"

She suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"No, no! It's just… my mom calls me Rainy. What a coincidence!"

He relaxed.

'Oh… for a moment, I was afraid that she remembers me. But it doesn't seem that way. Good. That is good…'

Was he a little bit disappointed?

Sunny took out his communicator, pressed a button on it, and threw

an etched chip that slid from the slick device to Rain.

She was in process of asking another question:

"Oh, and by the way, I often see you meandering on the porch and skipping school… are you a delinquent or wh…"

Then, she caught the chip and stared at it in confusion.

"Uh… what's this?"

Sunny smiled with a corner of his mouth.

"Can't you see? That's a government-issued citizenship chip. Now how would I have one if I wasn't of legal age?"

Rain looked at the chip, then grew even paler than usual.

"You, you really are eighteen?"

She was so mortified that she even used the proper honorifics.

Sunny laughed.

"Of course I am! As a respectable adult, I never lie. I am the most honest person in the world, really."

The girl seemed like she was currently wishing to sink into the earth.

"Oh… I am so s—sorry, then. I didn't think…"

As a child that grew up in a good family, she was most likely taught to be very polite to elders, so this situation was more or less a nightmare. Sunny himself had never associated with types of people who were particular about etiquette, but from what he had seen in Rain's school, among her ilk, social hierarchy and proper rituals were all the rage.

Luckily, Effie decided to appear at that very moment to put an end to the awkward situation. Opening the door, she rolled her wheelchair onto the porch while saying angrily:

"Listen, doofus, are you going to eat or not? Because if not, I'll eat

your portion too, you know…"

Then, she stopped and stared at Rain, then at Sunny. After a few moments, she asked:

"Who's your friend?"

Sunny rubbed his face.

"Eat as much as you want. And this girl lives in the neighborhood. She was just passing by."

Rain nodded.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am. I, uh… am very sorry. I was just on my way home from school, and made a mistake. You see, what has happened…"

Effie grinned, then gestured for her to stop talking.

"Let me guess… this one right here was zoning out with a nasty expression on his face, and then looked at you and said something wildly inappropriate?"

Rain blinked a couple of times, then said:

"Yes! I mean, no… he didn't say anything. It was me, I said something inappropriate!"

The former huntress shook her head.

"Then you're lucky! Sunny here is a bit special. One of a kind! The things that sometimes come out of his mouth…"

Sunny stared at her in outrage and hissed:

"The things that come out of my mouth?! You're the one to talk!"

She sighed, then looked at Rain with a hurt expression on her face:

"You see how he bullies me? Ah, that's no way to treat a guest, Sunny. So ungracious! What will this nice neighborhood kid even think…"

Rain energetically shook her head.

"No, no! I won't think anything. I… have to go home, actually. It's been nice meeting you!"

With that, she hurriedly turned around a made a step to walk away.

Effie raised her voice a little:

"Bye! Nice meeting you, too! If you feel guilty about the misunderstanding, you can stop by any time! With food! All will be forgiven!"

Sunny stared at her with wide eyes, not quite believing what he was hearing. Finally, when Rain's figure disappeared behind the green fence, Effie turned to him and smiled.

"...It's almost like there's a factory somewhere in the city releasing whole batches of tiny, pale, bony teenagers. That girl is almost as pale as you, Sunny! I can't believe it…"

With that, she shook her head, turned her wheelchair, and went back inside to continue her dinner.

Leaving Sunny alone, flabbergasted and trying to determine if he was currently awake.

'...What was that? What just happened?'

Of all the countless scenarios he had in his head of how his first meeting with Rain would go…

This was definitely not one of them!

Chapter-482: Peace Offering

Sunny was too shaken by what had just happened to do anything else today. So, he just went down to the basement, entered the Dream Realm, and remained in his small room in the Sanctuary instead of going out to fight Nightmare Creatures.

There, he just slept peacefully for the entire night.

This was a very strange way to act for Sunny, but many Awakened did just that every day. Unless their Citadel was under attack — which happened frequently in most parts of the Dream Realm — or they were assigned a certain duty, people just remained in their quarters, slept, and returned to the real world without throwing themselves into any kind of danger.

Others performed various tasks to earn a livelihood in the Citadel, all the while staying safe behind its walls. Few frequently ventured outside and challenged the wilderness of the Dream Realm.

And who could blame them?

Most people were made Awakened against their will, after all. It was the Spell that wanted humans to risk their lives, go through deadly trials and endure terrible suffering, not people themselves. So there was nothing wrong with a person who wanted to stay as safe as possible, for as long as possible.

If anything, it was Sunny who behaved abnormally.

In any case, he felt refreshed and more balanced when he returned to the real world in the morning. A good night of sleep helped him put his unexpected encounter with Rain in perspective.

Yes, it was an unfortunate mistake on his part, and yes, the fact that she now knew his face and name was less than ideal. But truly,

nothing too bad had happened. Rain just thought of him as a neighbor. Not even an acquaintance, just a… stranger.

Which was just as Sunny wanted it. To be on the safe side, he could avoid leaving the house for a while, altogether.

…And yet, in the evening, he found himself sitting on the porch again, enjoying the view and a cup of tea, as he had already grown used to.

'After yesterday, I doubt that she'll ever want to approach this house again. So I should be alright…'

But as it turned out, he was not.

Sunny noticed Rain walking from the public transport terminal long before she came anywhere near his home, because one of his shadows was stationed further down the street to keep a lookout. He sighed, then lowered his eyes and pretended to study the synthwood surface of the porch, hoping to avoid making eye contact with the teenage girl.

This time, he was not going to give her a reason to come closer and talk to him.

However, it was all for naught. When Rain approached the path leading to his door, she slowed down a bit, hesitated, then turned and walked directly to him.

'What the hell…'

Sunny raised his head and stared at her with a bit of surprise.

"Uh… hi. It's you again."

She nodded, then took off her backpack and produced a big food container out of it, seemingly full of something delicious. Then, Rain handed it to Sunny.

"Here. My mom made it. Your friend said to bring food, right? Oh… and I'm really sorry. For, you know… yesterday."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then took the container from her hands and stared at it for a bit.

'Damn Effie… who told her to ask for food? I cook great food for the both of us myself!'

Then, he pretended to smile and said:

"Yeah, she did. And no problem. Say thanks to your mom."

Sunny thought that the conversation would be over after that, but Rain lingered. There was a sort of curious expression on her face.

"It's nothing much, just some pasta with mushrooms and cream sauce. My favorite. Uh… Sunny, right? I'm Rain, by the way."

He looked at the food container again, reevaluating his stance on its existence. Nothing special, huh… he was willing to bet that the ingredients she listed were all natural, too. A far cry from synthpaste people like him usually consumed to keep their bellies full in the outskirts. Sunny knew a few guys who would kill to eat something like this.

His smile became more genuine.

"Yup, I'm Sunny. Nice to meet you, Rain."

She smiled slightly, hesitated for a few moments, and then asked:

"So you're really eighteen? And live alone in your own house? I mean, with that nice friend of yours."

Sunny shrugged.

"Sure. She's just staying over until she finds a place of her own, though. Why?"

The girl looked at him with wide eyes.

"I mean… aren't you a bit young to live on your own? Aren't your parents worried?"

He stared at her for a couple of seconds, then tilted his head a little.

"I think that I'm of a perfect age to live on my own. And no, my parents aren't worried about me one bit."

Rain smiled, as though hearing the most fascinating thing ever.

"But, like… who cooks your food? No, wait… who buys your food? Do you get an allowance? Or do you have a stipend from your university? Wait… do you even go to a university? I have so many questions!"

Sunny mentally groaned.

'Questions… I hate questions!'

Outwardly, though, he remained calm.

"What kind of questions are those? Obviously, I buy and cook my food myself. And who needs a university? A stipend! I am a wildly successful young entrepreneur, if you must know. Basically, I do whatever I want."

Rain stared at him.

"And your parent just let you? They're not lecturing you every day about the future, the importance of having a productive career, and how you must be always ready in case you get infected by the Spell?"

Sunny furrowed his brow.

"No, none of those."

Rain looked at him with envy and sighed.

"You're lucky! My mom and dad are like hawks!"

'...What the hell is a hawk? Something bad, I presume…'

He remained silent for a while, a complicated expression appearing on his face.

Finally, Sunny said:

"...Don't be hard on your mom and dad. You're the lucky one, really. I sort of twisted the truth a little. My parents don't care about where I am and what I do… because I don't have parents. So… I would rather be in your situation than mine, great as it is. Yours is a bit greater."

Rain stopped smiling and looked at him with a hard-to-read, sad expression on her pale face. Then, she said quietly:

"Oh… I see. Sorry. I didn't know."

She smiled a little and waved.

"Well, I'll be going then. Enjoy the pasta, Sunny!"

The young girl put her backpack back on, turned around, and left.

Sunny remained on the porch for a while, staring at the tray of food. Slowly, a dark expression settled on his face.

'I can't continue doing nothing anymore… I need to make a decision and proceed. I wasted too much time as it is, already…'

He avoided doing anything about getting Rain ready for the possibility of becoming infected by the Spell, because he didn't know what to do, and how.

But this inaction had to stop. He had to come up with something…

Chapter-483: Two Hundred Seconds

The problem was, he just didn't know enough to make a good decision. And even then… was he even qualified to make it?

Sunny had a lot of experience dealing with various situations, possessed a quick wit, and was street smart, as well as having a real talent for killing things and remaining alive.

Without wasting time on false modesty, he could admit that he excelled at many things.

But were the things he excelled at even applicable to training a young girl for the Nightmare Spell? After all, what he wanted to give her were not combat skills or survival tactics… those she was being taught already, in an elite school that someone like him would have never been able to attend.

What he wanted to give her was a mindset that would allow her to survive in the unforgiving hell of the Dream Realm. And the mind… the mind was a delicate thing.

If he went about it in the wrong way, he could bring more harm than good.

Not to mention that everyone was different, and what worked for him was not guaranteed to work for someone else. Take his own friends, for example… all of them had wildly diverging mindsets, but each had been able to thrive even in a place as dire and harrowing as the Forgotten Shore.

'So… what the hell do I do?!'

Sunny massaged his temples, then sighed.

First… he had to observe more and understand more. Whatever he wanted to decide, it was stupid to try and base that decision on observing Rain for a single day as she went about her classes.

'Maybe I'll get inspired. Or my intuition will give me a hint…'

With that thought, he frowned, finished his tea, and went inside.

***

The next morning, Sunny left his house early and used the transit system to reach the district where Rain's school was located.

Now that he knew the place, he didn't need to follow his sister around. Instead, he went ahead, returned to the cafe he had hidden in the last time, and sent one of his shadows to keep watch on the entrance of the school as it waited for the young girl to appear.

Half an hour later, he noticed her figure and silently ordered the shadow to follow Rain inside.

'I am going to have to keep studying her demeanor for a while… a few weeks, at least. By then, it is going to be clear if my initial impression was right, or if I need to reconsider my evaluation. I'll also understand her strengths and weaknesses much better.'

Sunny had to stop himself from groaning.

A few weeks… that was going to really eat into his time. Both the hunt for shadow fragments and his training with Effie and Saint were going to suffer. Which was such a shame. Recently, he was starting to feel a hint of confidence when handling the Cruel Sight in its spear form.

Previously, Sunny had mistakenly considered the spear to be a rather static weapon, one mostly capable of only straightforward thrusting attacks. And on the surface, it was… more than that, this was actually one of its best features.

Anyone could use a spear with a decent level of effectiveness. That was why it ruled the battlefield for thousands of years — unlike the sword, a person didn't need endless hours of practice to become a

proficient amateur with it.

But in the hands of a master… in the hands of a master, the spear was a completely different beast. It was swift, deadly, and unpredictable, capable of a vast variety of attacks at a wide array of ranges. It was a truly versatile weapon capable of dealing devastating damage to anyone who would dare to approach its wielder. What Sunny liked the most, though, was how deceiving a spear could be.

Cruel Sight, in particular, was especially flexible due to its long blade, which could both pierce and slash. Not to mention the fact that the length of its shaft could be changed at will.

…Sunny was still much more comfortable with swords, though. Especially familiar ones, like the Midnight Shard or the great odachi form of the Soul Serpent. He was growing rather fond of the ability to keep his enemies further away from his body that the Cruel Sight gave him, nevertheless.

So it was a real shame that he was going to have to reduce the amount of time he trained by a lot. That was not even the main reason why he felt malcontent about the prospect of spending weeks observing Rain at school, though.

The main reason was… teenagers.

Sunny clearly remembered the mental trauma he had experienced after being forced to watch the young elites attending the prestigious school making life difficult for both themselves and the teachers.

Even after having to fall into an endless abyss while eating the rotten meat of a devil and burning in the ocean of divine flames, he would rather repeat the whole thing than experience school life again…

Well, almost.

Not really…

With a sigh, Sunny concentrated on the pastry in front of him and prepared for a long and arduous day. That pastry alone made his mood better, simply because of the fact that it didn't come from a Mimic.

The young elites were the same — venomous, incredibly misguided, and infuriating. Luckily, Rain was also the same — she studied quietly and avoided all the drama, which basically made her a pariah.

'Good girl, Rain… that's right, disregard all the nonsense and learn as much as you can. Knowledge is a privilege… these classmates of yours are too stupid to value it, but you're not…'

Well, it wasn't as though they were some delinquents, either. Academic achievement was the cornerstone of the social hierarchy in this elite school, so the competition among the students was fierce. It was just that most saw learning as a tool to earn status, as opposed to the goal.

Not that their priorities were any of Sunny's business.

Hour went after hour, and at some point, he decided to leave the cafe and take a walk to chase away the boredom.

But before he could, however, something happened.

His communicator suddenly let out a grating, echoing ringing sound. A second later, the sound repeated.

…And it wasn't only just him. Every person in the cafe, from the clients to the members of the staff, was receiving the same notification.

Sunny's chest grew cold.

He knew that sound, of course. Everyone in the world knew and dreaded it.

Looking down, he saw the familiar text appear on the screen of his communicator.

'No...'

The notification read:

EMERGENCY ALERT

EMERGENCY ALERT

GATE ACTIVITY DETECTED IN YOUR PROXIMITY

ETA: 201 SECONDS

EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY!

Chapter-484: The Gate

'A Gate… there is a Gate…'

Before Sunny even comprehended these words, he was trembling, cold fear rising from the depths of his heart to swallow him whole. This was not a conscious response, but an instinctual reaction — something that his body had learned to do in the past, the terror that all modern humans came to bear in their very bones.

The grating, echoing ringing meant only one thing — run! Run if you wish to live, if you don't want to die in a manner so harrowing that words could not describe it.

But Sunny wasn't a mundane human anymore.

Strangling the instinctual fear, he threw it aside and stared at the screen of the communicator with a dark expression on his face.

The notification was similar to the ones he had seen several times in the past. Previously, when he lived in the outskirts, he had learned of the devastation an opening Gate could bring firsthand. Wherever you lived, you were bound to hear that sound once every few years.

Granted, the infrastructure in the outskirts was way less developed than in the proper parts of the city, and there wasn't a lot of Awakened around. So the results were often more disastrous.

He was in a very respectable district right now.

But ironically, things were much worse.

Sunny wasn't very versed in the technology the government used to detect the appearing Gates in advance, but he knew that it failed this time. Usually, people would receive a notification at least ten minutes, half an hour, sometimes even days before the dreaded

event.

This gave most of them time to evacuate out of the impact zone, and also allowed the government forces to arrive before the flood of Nightmare Creatures broke free of the opening Gate and cut through the ranks of the nearby Awakened who tried to stall it.

Two hundred seconds… that was nothing. Less than nothing. It was not nearly enough time for people to run, and not nearly enough for help to arrive. Such a small time window meant only one thing…

That unless something happened, there was going to be a massacre.

He was safe, though. He could just Shadow Step away at any moment.

As people jumped to their feet and ran to the exit with panicked expressions, Sunny sighed and pressed on the notification.

Immediately, a map opened up, showing him the location of where the Gate was going to appear, as well as optimal evacuation routes.

'Too close…'

There was no way that Rain's school was going to be able to evacuate thousands of students in time. If their hazard protocols were well established, they were not even going to try. They would just gather the children in the most protected part of the school, activate their defense systems, and try to hold until help arrived.

The school was in the direct vicinity of the opening Gate, though. Sunny wasn't sure how well its defenses would do, no matter how formidable they were. Even if there were several Awakened staffed as security personnel or instructors for this exact eventuality, they wouldn't be able to do much. The true elites would not take such positions, after all.

'What to do…'

This time, the notification interface was different from how Sunny had seen it in the past.

There was an additional, urgently blinking symbol on the map. It was very similar to the insignia Master Jet wore on her sleeve, only this one had two stars on it instead of three.

This symbol was there because the communicator knew that Sunny was an Awakened.

…There were one hundred and ninety-two seconds remaining until the Gate opened. Out in the classroom where one of his shadows was currently hiding, the children and the teacher were still staring at the notification with stunned expressions, not yet comprehending what it meant exactly. Or simply refusing to…

Not paying a lot of attention to the chaos happening around him, Sunny pressed on the symbol, and additional information appeared on the screen.

ATTENTION ALL AWAKENED

REQUEST IMMEDIATE ACTION

ATTENTION ALL AWAKENED

REQUEST IMMEDIATE...

Below that, several lines of text shimmered:

Gate Category: 2 (89% probability), 3 (10% probability), HIGHER (undefined).

Strike Force ETA: 16 min, 14 sec.

'Thirteen minutes!'

A corner of Sunny's mouth twitched, a resentful grimace appearing on his face.

The earliest any government force would be able to arrive at the Gate was in thirteen minutes after it had opened. Thirteen minutes… that might as well have been an eternity.

'Too long!'

And now, Sunny had to make a decision.

He had to either run away or respond to the call to arms to stand in front of the Nightmare Gate, hoping to survive in the flood of monsters for thirteen entire minutes.

Well… it wasn't that hard of a decision, really. Sunny knew that he was going to stay — not out of any sort of moral obligation, but simply because he wanted to.

He was equally as reluctant to turn tail and allow the Spell to invade his world with impunity as he was to see countless nice, mundane humans die in the maws of Nightmare Creatures. Like the polite waitress who served him the delicious pastries, or the baker who had made them.

This was his world, his city, and his fellow humans. Before, Sunny was always weak and had no choice but to run, hide, and tremble in fear.

...He was done living his life in fear a long time ago, though. He was also done allowing anyone — or anything — to take what was his without a bloody fight.

He was done being weak.

But even that wasn't the real reason. Perhaps Sunny would have considered the approaching disaster too much of a risk and retreated… but Rain was there, very near to the center of the map displaying the Gate's impact zone.

So really, running away wasn't even an option.

One hundred and eighty seconds remained.

Now left alone in the empty cafe, Sunny stood up and stretched. A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"This is going to be… a wild, wild ride…"

Chapter-485: Lesser Evil

Now that he knew that he was — insanity! — going to act, Sunny had to decide how exactly, and do it very fast.

Sadly, the question was not as easy as it seemed.

His life was too complicated for anything to be easy…

Not only was the answer to the question not too obvious, but, what's worse, he had mere seconds to make a decision, which was not nearly enough to think things through with any sort of clarity.

But what choice did he have? None at all...

Sunny grimaced.

'Let's speedrun our options.'

The safest and most cowardly option was to Shadow Step into the classroom through the shadow spying on Rain, grab the girl, and bring her away.

At least it seemed safe on the surface.

In reality, though, such an action would cause all types of terrible consequences both for him and for his sister. Not only was he going to have a lot of explaining to do, revealing all the things he wanted to keep hidden, he would also leave countless witnesses, as well as digital evidence, connecting Rain to him and vice versa.

In the future, whenever he was going to end up having really dangerous enemies — which Sunny had no doubt would happen one day, soon — that evidence was going to come to light and lead them to her. Which was not something he was willing to accept.

So, he was going to leave that option as the last resort, and act on it

only if the school's defenses were breached and Rain was in imminent danger.

With that out of the way, there was only one path left — doing his civic duty and going directly to the Gate, in hopes of stalling the tide of Nightmare Creatures long enough for the cavalry to arrive.

Awakened who didn't work for the government were expected and encouraged, but not technically obligated to respond to a call like that. Many, maybe even most, did not, and chose to run instead. And who could blame them? Not everyone with an Aspect was a combatant, and even those who were had not become one voluntarily.

Forcing these already traumatized people to go to their potential deaths under the threat of retribution if they refused was not something the government was eager to do. Or maybe, it simply couldn't — forcing Awakened to do anything was a dangerous idea, since they could potentially topple the government if pushed too much.

So, the government preferred to use a carrot instead of a stick when dealing with them. It was a delicate balance.

Sunny wasn't sure that he was even going to see that carrot, though. Because he was facing a dilemma.

Yes, he had decided to fight in front of the Gate, but this could also be done in several ways.

…Two ways, really.

Sunny could go into battle as himself, or… as Mongrel, protecting his identity from prying eyes, and himself from any attention.

Using Weaver's Mask was not without risk, as every time he did so without proper preparations could potentially leave behind context clues that would allow smart people to narrow down the list of suspects.

But the alternative… right now, with not a lot of time to weigh all the pros and cons, Sunny felt that the alternative was worse.

If he wanted to have a hope of surviving for thirteen minutes, he was going to have to go all out, showcasing the full scope of his true powers. That meant that all his efforts to create an image of a talented, but not too dangerous or noteworthy young Awakened were going to be destroyed.

He was going to become really, really famous… and draw the eyes of entities he wanted to remain blind to his existence for as long as possible.

Perhaps even worse, he was going to create one too many coincidences for Rain to continue not noticing his secret attention.

It was one thing to have a quirky neighbor… if he suddenly showed up near your school in your moment of need, and turned out to be one of the most deadly Awakened of his generation, though… that would most likely be enough to make her start asking questions that Sunny wasn't ready to answer.

So…

Awakened Sunless was going to have to cowardly run away from the Gate.

While Mongrel was going to have to stand and fight.

'What a messed up situation...'

One hundred and seventy seconds remained.

Sunny sighed, knowing full well that this decision was not ideal. At the minimum, Mongrel's persona prevented him from using some of his most powerful tools — anything that people knew and associated with Sunny, no less. Like the Cruel Sight…

Very few people had seen him use Saint, however. In fact, outside of Neph's cohort, Mordret was pretty much the only person who had. There were also the people he had fought the Lord of the Dead with, but all of them were gone now… with one notable exception. Seishan was still alive and out there somewhere, in the embrace of one of the three Great Clans.

So summoning Saint was not ideal, either. Even though someone else could have received a similar Echo, revealing her was really risky. He could only do it if things got really desperate.

'Uh… maybe I should reconsider…'

But there was no time to consider things anymore.

There were less than three minutes left before the Gate opened. He would just have to manage, somehow.

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment, then checked where the cameras monitoring the cafe were located, and walked into their blind zone. There, he summoned the Covetous Coffer, placed his communicator on its lid, and sent the box scurrying in the direction opposite of where he himself was headed.

After that, Sunny took a deep breath… and dissipated into the shadows.

A few seconds later and hundreds of meters away, an armored figure wearing a fearsome black mask walked out of the darkness, the blade of the great odachi resting on its shoulder.

Mongrel had arrived at the Nightmare Gate.

Chapter-486: Call of a Nightmare

The road ahead of Sunny was almost empty. Only several people could still be seen, running away from the vertical line where the air was rippling strangely, a hundred or so meters behind their backs. When they saw his menacing figure, the stragglers recoiled. Someone let out a frightened yelp.

Not paying them any attention, Sunny calmly walked forward.

The Soul Serpent rested on his shoulder.

'Strange… I have never seen an opening Gate up close before.'

The deserted street in front of him did, indeed, look very eerie. Not only because it was almost entirely empty, both of pedestrians and of rushing PTVs, but also because light and shadows were behaving very strangely, the hue of the light slightly wrong, the movement of the shadows slightly erratic.

The sound was strange, too. It was deadly quiet, but at the same time, Sunny couldn't get rid of the feeling that there were barely audible noises coming from all directions, assaulting his ears like an inaudible cacophony of muffled, distant, demented screams.

There was a strange pressure rising in the air, getting stronger the closer he got to the nascent Nightmare Gate.

The Gate itself was easy to recognize. It looked like a tall vertical depression in the fabric of the world, a place where light refracted in unnatural ways and the inaudible screams were the loudest… not a rift in reality yet, but a hint of one.

In front of the Gate, half a dozen people stood, staring at it in tense

silence. The Awakened who, just like Sunny, decided to answer the call.

'Only six of them…'

While that fact didn't promise him anything good, it was to be expected. Two hundred seconds was just not enough for a lot of willing defenders to arrive.

Even those who were ready to risk their lives in an attempt to protect the civilians needed time to get to the Gate, after all… this bunch were those who had already been in the immediate impact zone when the alert was sent to their communicators, just like Sunny.

Maybe they were overly confident in their abilities, or maybe, just like him, they had people they cared about in the surrounding area, perhaps even in the very same school where Rain was, a few hundred meters behind their backs.

In any case, he couldn't help but feel a bit of respect toward these people. Coming to a Gate already required a lot of courage… remaining even after it became clear that there were going to be less than ten Awakened fighting side by side to stall the tide of monsters was beyond that.

These people were ready to die to fulfill their duty.

'...Fools. Brave, brave fools.'

What about Sunny himself, then?

'I am a fool, too. But a cowardly one.'

Sunny had no plans of dying today. He knew what he was doing, and had ways to escape if things got too dire.

Without slowing down even a little, he calmly walked past the six Awakened and stopped with his back to them, closer to the Gate than anyone else.

Unwittingly, Sunny found himself standing at the head of the small group of defenders.

Unlike them, he showed no sign of fear. The others were staring at the Gate with pale faces, their bodies tense, their eyes full of unease and dark resentment. Sunny's pose, however, was confident, indifferent… almost relaxed.

And in the eyes of the fearsome mask, there was nothing but darkness.

The others reacted to his arrival with excitement. One more Awakened to fight with them was already a good thing, but this one, in particular, looked especially imposing. His onyx armor and fearsome blade were obviously a cut above the Memories they themselves had in their possession, and his calm demeanor suggested either an experienced fighter… or a madman.

And then, someone recognized him.

"Wait… isn't that M—mongrel?!"

The others looked at the girl who spoke with confusion.

"Who?"

She stared at them with wide eyes.

"That's… that's Lord Mongrel! Haven't you heard of him?"

A hint of recognition appeared in the eyes of the Awakened gathered in front of the opening Gate. One of them glanced at Sunny, lingered for a moment, and asked:

"I am sorry, friend. This young woman seems to have heard of you. If I may ask, are you an Awakened of some renown?"

Sunny didn't move a muscle, and lied almost on autopilot:

"...I am not an Awakened. I have no renown."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean, not an Awakened? Then who are you?"

Sunny cursed inwardly.

'My damned tongue…'

He gritted his teeth, remained silent for a second, and then answered in a calm tone:

"I am just a human."

Then, he sighed and turned his head slightly, staring at the six Awakened.

From the look of their Memories and how they held themselves, they weren't elites. Several seemed to know how to hold a sword, but that was all. They were going to get eaten alive once the Gate opened.

Disheartened, he asked:

"Combat Aspects?"

The defenders looked at each other, and then the girl who had recognized him answered:

"I have an Awakened Aspect that enhances my agility and allows me to strike with deadly precision. Two guys have Dormant Aspects centered around endurance and strength, and the other two can perform ranged elemental attacks."

So, three weak Combat Aspects, two supporting fighters, and no one capable of proper support or healing.

He lowered his head for a moment.

There were only thirty seconds left before the Gate opened. Slight tremors were running through the ground beneath his feet, and bits of dust and small pieces of gravel were slowly rising into the air, levitating on the invisible currents of energy coursing through the air.

'How I am going to do this?'

Sunny gripped the hilt of the Soul Serpent tighter, then said hoarsely:

"Stay back, kill anything that gets past me."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"...Make them bleed."

The girl stared at him with wide eyes.

"Stay… stay back? But, sir, you can't do it alone! There will be a horde of them! Even if there were a hundred of you, that wouldn't be enough to kill them all!"

Sunny turned away and looked at the slowly opening rift in front of him.

How could he get these people to stay out of his way? The best place for them to be was at the back, finishing off anything that Sunny failed to kill and preventing the Nightmare Creatures from escaping into the city... escaping toward Rain's school.

Failing to come up with a better lie, he opened his mouth and said coldly:

"One of me is enough to kill them all."

With that, Sunny left the girl standing there with an open mouth, and walked forward.

'What's the big deal, anyway? It's… it's just a Nightmare Gate…'

His legs, however, were trembling a little.

Just at that moment, an especially strong tremor ran through the ground.

The shadows exploded in a mad dance, the sunlight growing dim and ghostly.

The wind howled through the empty street, as if the air was being sucked into the widening rift.

And then, an invisible shockwave spread out of it, making the

windows in the surrounding building shatter.

Sunny resisted the push and suddenly felt the familiar feeling permeate his soul.

...The call of a Nightmare.

The Gate had opened.

Chapter-487: First Wave

Sunny took a step forward and brandished the Soul Serpent, feeling the indomitable nature of Saint's grounded battle style permeate his bones. The gloomy shadow wrapped itself around the blade of the odachi, causing it to shine with dark radiance.

Just like the taciturn demon, this Serpent shared a kinship with the shadow, and as such, the augmentation it received was even more powerful than Sunny himself could enjoy. Even though the odachi was only of the Dormant Rank, for now, this alone made it equal to an Awakened blade in terms of sharpness, durability, and lethality.

He activated the [Living Stone] and [Feather of Truth] enchantments of the onyx armor to make it light as a feather and able to heal the damage it was bound to receive.

Then, Sunny summoned the Blood Blossom charm and willed the armor to integrate it, activating the [Underworld Armament] enchantment. This way, the enhancing effect the crimson flower had on his Memories and Shadows was going to be inherited by the Mantle itself, and then strengthened even further.

He had not told the other Awakened to make the Nightmare Creatures bleed just to seem cool. He literally needed there to be as much blood flowing to the pavement as possible, so that his armor and sword became as powerful as possible.

The Gate was open now, revealing a dark rift in the fabric of reality, as wide as the street itself and as tall as the buildings. It seemed to devour all light around it… and call to him.

Call for him to enter.

…Sunny wasn't too preoccupied with the gate itself, though. His gaze was locked on the unclear silhouettes moving through the darkness.

Soon, the first Nightmare Creature burst into the daylight, leaving cracks on the asphalt with its black claws.

'...Good.'

Had he not wanted to accumulate shadow fragments? Had he not wanted to raise the counter of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment?

Well, he should have been careful about what he wished for!

There were going to be hundreds of abominations coming through the rift today to satiate his wish…

The Second Category Gates were the most frequent to appear in the waking world. As such, everyone was familiar with how they functioned.

The first few waves of advancing Nightmare Creatures were not going to be too terrible, at least for a fighter of Sunny's caliber. They would be comprised mostly of Dormant creatures, with some Awakened abominations mixed in. Their Classes and numbers, too, would be comparatively low.

But these first few waves… they were just a hint of the horror to come.

Pretty soon, every Nightmare Creature coming from the Gate was going to be of the Awakened Rank, with more and more Fallen ones appearing as well. Their Classes were going to rise, until there were as many Demons as there were Monsters and Beasts around.

And if Sunny was still alive by the time this second stage was nearing its culmination… well, two things could happen, neither promising him anything good.

Either the Gate was going to end up really being of the Second Category, or not.

If it continued to grow, reaching the Third Category, then there would be more and more waves of Nightmare Creatures, hundreds of Fallen abominations lunging into the real world from the dark void

between worlds, with Corrupted horrors and creatures of higher Classes appearing among them.

If it didn't… then, the Guardian of the Gate would manifest itself into reality. The Guardian was always at least one Rank higher than the Gate's Category, and could be of any high Class, from a Devil… to a dreaded Titan.

…In any case, Sunny had to live through the initial waves first to find out what was going to kill him in the end.

The first creature to appear from the darkness resembled a terrifying hound with bloodred bone spikes growing from its mottled, black fur. It landed on the road and opened its maw, then produced a guttural, hoarse roar.

…And then abruptly grew silent as Shadow Serpent's blade slashed across its neck, severing its head entirely.

[You have slain a Dormant Beast…]

Sunny jumped back, and just as he did, more silhouettes lunged at him from the dark rift, their eyes burning with madness and bloodthirst as they smelled what was waiting for them up ahead…

A whole world full of defenseless, untainted souls for them to devour.

'Not so fast, you filth…'

Sunny had a very simple plan.

He was going to build a barrier in front of the Gate.

…He was going to build a mountain of bleeding corpses right at the border of the darkness, to show the next waves of Nightmare Creatures how welcoming the real world was to their kind.

As soon as more spiked hounds entered into the light, he lunged forward to meet them.

Blood sprayed into the air, and as the menacing odachi reaped another life, Sunny shifted his weight, slammed the pommel of the

sword into the face of a lunging creature, then swiftly stepped forward and pierced the third one through the throat.

Before the drops of blood even fell to the ground, he tore the blade from the corpse of the abomination, slicing it almost in half, and brought his heel on the skull of the beast he had previously slammed to the ground. In the process, he increased the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld, so the creature's head simply exploded under his boot.

All of it took no more than two seconds.

…And on the third second, a dozen hellish beasts emerged from the rift, some of them running, some of them jumping high into the air to land on him from above.

Behind them, a macabre wall of flesh, claws, and fangs was spilling out of the darkness like a rabid tide.

Sunny growled, feeling the enchantment of the Blood Blossom activate and fill his sword with an unquenchable bloodlust.

'Come! Come, you bastards! Let this mongrel guide you all to hell!'

Chapter-488: A Beast More Terrible

No matter how fast Sunny was, how intricate his control of the shadow essence was — he had spent a whole month doing nothing but practicing it, after all — no matter how strong his body could become as the result, he still couldn't be in several places at the same time.

Yes, he had two cores brimming with power, and his armor and his weapon were augmented by a combination of an Aspect Ability and enchantments. Killing one of the infernal hounds without receiving a hit was not that big of a problem… several, even.

But a dozen? That was too much, even for him.

So Sunny didn't even try.

At this point, Mantle of the Underworld was as close to the pinnacle of the Ascended Rank as a Memory could be, so these Dormant beasts had no chance of piercing it with their fangs. He could allow himself to be bitten a few times.

He just had to be strategic about it.

He had to protect his neck and the back of his head, as well as pay attention to balance and mass. Yes, the abominations couldn't get to his flesh just yet, but an impact was still an impact. If he wasn't careful, the bastards were going to topple him, and once he was on the ground, the game would be over.

Luckily, he had [Feather of Truth] at his disposal and could manipulate the weight of the onyx armor, turning it from incredibly light to as heavy as a mountain. In conjunction with the cautious use of Saint's grounded style, which excelled at solid footwork and

indomitability, he could stay upright no matter how many beasts attacked him.

Ignoring the creatures that were lunging at him from the ground, Sunny dashed to the side to avoid being landed on by one of the jumping hounds, and received another on the tip of the odachi, allowing the momentum to impale it on the sword.

Before the heavy carcass could weigh the Shadow Serpent down, Sunny used the long hilt as a lever and slammed the dead creature into the mass of its attacking kin.

By that time, one jaw was already closing on his thigh, and another was centimeters away from his forearm.

The bloodred fangs scraped against the stonelike metal of the onyx armor, not leaving even a scratch on it.

Sunny let go of the hilt of the odachi with one hand, then hooked its blade under the throat of one of the attacking abominations and made a simple move forward, slicing through tough fur, skin, and vulnerable flesh beneath.

His other fist landed on the head of the second beast. Unseen to anyone, the Moonlight Shard appeared in it at the last moment, its ghostly blade easily piercing the creature's skull and disappearing as fast as it had appeared after destroying its brain.

Sunny spun, throwing both corpses aside, caught the hilt of the odachi with his second hand, made a small thrust to pierce a lunging hound's head right through one of its eyes, and then dashed forward to descend on the group of them entangled in the carcass of the abomination he had caught on the tip of his blade earlier.

What happened next could only be described as a morbid, bloody dance. Sunny moved through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, much faster than any of them were, his great sword flying through them with graceful and fluid logic, sending more and more blood spraying into the air. Somehow, he managed to avoid most of their attacks, and those he did not ended up sliding fruitlessly from his armor.

He almost made it look easy.

…But of course, it wasn't.

Any of these beasts, even though they were only Dormant, could massacre countless mundane humans, or kill a less skillful Awakened in one fell lunge. It was just that today, they met a far more terrifying creature.

A true Awakened fighter.

And a monstrous one, at that…

Sunny cut through the mass of spiked hounds, strategically leaving many of them maimed, but alive. They could only bleed as long as they weren't dead, after all. And he needed them to bleed a lot to bring the Blood Blossom to the peak of its strength.

There were many of them around him… too many, really. But that, too, could be used to his advantage. He used the corpses of the beasts he had slain, the ones he had left alive, and those who were yet to meet his blade as a barrier to slow down the others. Through superior speed and clever positioning, he was able to not only always remain moving, but also evade being surrounded.

Things weren't exactly easy, but he was still managing without too much strain. His main problem right now was to not allow any of the abominations to move past him and escape into the streets.

Luckily, the few that did manage to slip by were quickly finished by the six Awakened staying behind, observing the massacre with grim, tense, and darkly awed expressions.

However, Sunny wasn't oblivious to the fact that this successful start was an illusion.

The first wave was just an appetizer, after all. Simply a hint of the true calamity to come.

So, his goal, for now, was to kill as many of the dormant beasts as he could, bring the augmentation of the Blood Blossom to considerable strength, and throw as many corpses at the stretch of cracked asphalt

directly in front of the Gate as possible, to make it harder for the stronger abominations to enter into the real world at full speed.

He felt the dreaded change too soon, though.

It came in a form of an eerie, long whistle that suddenly made the hounds lunge at him with renewed fury.

And then…

A crude arrow suddenly flashed out of the darkness of the rift, almost hitting him in the eye. The arrowhead, fashioned out of a splinter of a red bone, exploded against the wood of Weaver's Mask, throwing his head back.

'What the…'

He swiftly repositioned and caught his balance, then dashed forward and skewered several beasts on the blade of the Shadow Serpent.

More arrows flew out of the darkness, piercing the flesh of the attacking hounds or sliding off the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld.

He felt each hit, though. The power behind these arrows was truly monstrous.

'Awakened… Awakened creatures are coming! Already?!'

As soon as he thought that, the first of the hunters came out of the darkness, following their hounds into the real world.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

A tall, desiccated humanoid with skin as black as coal and as rough as the bark of an ancient tree, wearing rotten remains of fur armor, raised a mighty bow made out of wood and bone, and looked at him with empty holes where his eyes should have been.

Furious, red flames burned in their darkness instead.

'Crap!'

Sunny grabbed one of the hounds and hoisted its body up… just in time for the arrow to pierce its body instead of hitting him in the face.

'Bows, they're using bows?!'

How was that even fair?!

Feeling the bloodlust of the Blossom charm surge in his heart, Sunny threw the dying hound at the bone hunter, gripped his sword, and dashed forward once again.

Chapter-489: Second Wave

There were several ancient archers aiming at him already, and more and more of the hunters were appearing from the darkness. Some wielded bows, some spears with jagged flint blades and crude axes.

Those were Awakened Monsters, each and every one — equal in Rank and Class to Carapace Centurions Sunny had fought once, a long time ago, on the Forgotten Shore.

And to Sunny himself, technically.

…A much tougher enemy for him to slaughter.

Luckily, unlike the massive centurions, the hunters weren't covered in adamantine chitin from head to toe.

Ducking under the flying arrow, Sunny lunged forward and thrust the tip of the odachi into the desiccated flesh of one of the bowmen. The black, bark-like skin offered a lot of resistance to the shadow-honed blade, but the force of the blow was terrible enough to rip through flesh and bone, allowing it to pierce the body of the hunter and emerge from his back.

Sunny just hoped that these bastards had anatomy similar to humans, and that their hearts were located in the same place.

From the look of it, they were… however, the monster did not react to having his heart destroyed as a human would. Instead of dying, he simply grabbed the blade of the Shadow Serpent and took a step forward, skewering himself deeper onto it, in an attempt to reach Sunny with the other hand.

'Curses!'

Sunny twisted the blade, severing the monster's fingers, and then

pulled the odachi upward, slicing through his ribcage, neck, and skull.

This, finally, caused the bowman to die.

[You have slain an Awakened Monster, Ancient Barrow Wraith.]

'Revenants… great! Simply great, damn it!'

So he was fighting corpses that were possessed by some sort of a murderous spirit… as such, the hunters weren't fully sentient. That didn't stop them from remembering some of their craft, though. Not only were they able to wield their stone weapons with deadly skill, they also seemed to coordinate their attacks, herding Sunny like prey.

The archers moved apart so that he would have no choice but to show his back to one while attacking another. Those with melee weapons rushed forward, aiming to surround him. The situation was quickly turning desperate.

Sunny gritted his teeth, dodged a strike of a stone axe, saw it shatter the asphalt into dust, and lashed out with the Shadow Serpent. Just a moment after the blade of the great odachi severed the attacker's legs, another arrow hit him in the shoulder, causing Sunny to stagger and almost lose his balance.

He glanced around him, noticing that the enemies had succeeded in positioning themselves in a way that would have doomed a normal enemy. He was surrounded from all sides, with archers hiding behind mighty hunters wielding spears and axes.

'Damn it. I didn't want to do this…'

As a dozen arrows streaked through the air to bite at his armor… Sunny suddenly disappeared.

A moment later, he appeared behind one of the archers and decapitated him with one terrible strike.

Before others even had time to register what had happened, Sunny was inexplicably at the opposite side of their formation, his odachi piercing the head of another archer.

Almost leaving afterimages behind, the figure of the warrior in the menacing onyx armor seemed to blink between half a dozen monsters in the span of a few seconds. Each time it appeared, one of the creatures died, their black bodies crumbling into piles of severed limbs and shattered skulls.

The blade of the great odachi shone with dark radiance, cutting through the ancient hunters like a reaper's scythe.

A few moments later, Sunny slid backward on the broken asphalt, leaving a bloody trail behind.

A low growl escaped from beneath his mask.

Enhanced by the [Underworld Armament], the enchantment of the Blood Blossom was behaving strangely. It was supposed to augment his Memories, Echoes, and Shadows, but with so much blood flowing to the ground, Sunny found that even his body and mind were being affected by the morbid charm a little.

He felt both exhilarated and frustrated — exhilarated by the slaughter he was perpetrating, and frustrated because he wanted… needed… to kill more, cut more, make them bleed more, more, more, so much more…

'Blood... blood... more!'

Sunny basked in the ecstasy of bloodshed for a split second, and then lashed out at himself, making the rabid thirst recede.

He needed to be careful. This bloodlust was beneficial, but could easily blind him. He had to maintain clarity… that was the only way to control the flow of the battle and survive. Thankfully, he knew how to keep a cool head better than most.

…Regardless, although using Shadow Step so many times in rapid succession cost him a lot of shadow essence, he had managed to break the enemy formation and eliminate most of the archers. The rest were going to be much easier to deal with now.

But of course, the Gate was not done with him. It continued to spew more and more enemies, making any progress he had made

meaningless.

As a new wave of hunters emerged from the darkness, a frenzied mass of hounds rushing between the wraiths, he paled a little.

'...Too many!'

No matter how superior his armor, weapon, and skill were, he was going to get buried under the tide of Nightmare Creatures due to their momentum.

And even if he managed to cut a hole in the wall of abominations, the rest were going to move past him and descend upon the six Awakened, and then, inevitably, escape into the streets of the city.

Toward Rain's school.

'Damn! This is going to suck!'

As the new wave of creatures lunged forward, joining the survivors of the previous one, Sunny shifted his Memories around. For a brief second, the Broken Oath took the place of the Blood Blossom, its soul-eroding aura being inherited and enhanced by the Mantle of the Underworld.

A wave of nausea washed over Sunny's mind.

'Argh!'

A mental scream rang in his head.

Luckily, he was prepared for the pain. His armor provided him with a solid defense against soul attacks, too… even ones coming from the Mantle itself. The attacking Nightmare Creatures, on the other hand, had no resistance to it at all…

Sunny had only kept the Broken Oath active for a second before changing the slotted charm back to the Blood Blossom, but it was enough to break the momentum of the tide of abominations.

The hunters staggered, the hounds stumbled and slowed down. For a brief moment, the whole mass of monsters seemed disoriented.

Sunny used this opportunity well.

The dark figure wearing a fearsome mask suddenly appeared in the very middle of the enemies, and before the Nightmare Creatures could regain their bearing, the great blade of the odachi turned into a whirlwind of darkness, leaving clouds of bloody mist and severed corpses everywhere he went.

Sunny had abandoned Saint's grounded style, reduced the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld to that of a feather, and turned to pure offense, dancing between the enemies like a dark, slaughtering demon.

For now, he was still at his peak…

But exhaustion was already not too far behind. As he fought, his breath was slowly becoming hoarse and labored.

'How… how long has it been?'

He thought back to what had happened until now…

And felt the first hint of desperation.

Just a couple of minutes.

The whole battle took slightly more than two minutes.

And he had to continue for at least eleven more…

Chapter-490: Break Point

Six minutes.

That was how long Sunny managed to hold on until things really went from bad to terrible.

By then, the ground in front of the Gate was littered with piles of corpses, their blood flowing down the pavement like a crimson stream. He had lost count of how many dormant abominations he had slain, how many ancient hunters he had sliced apart.

Despite how strong and fearsome the primeval wraiths were, their assault had broken against the impenetrable barrier of his blade, his Aspect, and his will.

Sunny paid a price, though.

By now, his muscles were burning, and he had to force the air in and out of his struggling lungs. The Mantle of the Underworld held, but his body beneath the black stonelike metal was beaten and battered. The armor itself was covered in blood and dented slightly in several places.

Those dents did not come from the hunters, though.

During the third wave, new Nightmare Creatures emerged from the darkness of the Gate… among them were larger beasts, more terrifying than the hounds Sunny had been slaughtering.

And their masters.

The demons of the mysterious Barrow were similar to the desiccated huntsmen, but much taller, stronger, and better equipped. They wielded masterfully crafted flint weapons and armors made out of rotten leather and bone, their empty eyes burning with hungry red

flames.

What's worse, they really knew how to use their stone spears and swords.

Met with the strange, ferocious, and deviously lethal battle style of the primeval demons, Sunny was sent for a loop. This was like nothing he had ever experienced before. They fought with the straightforward, yet insidious resolve of cunning apex predators, with the evil will to kill through any means necessary, always following the most efficient and barbarously cruel path to dominance.

It should not have worked, but it did.

The dents on Sunny's armor could attest to it.

Well… he shouldn't have been surprised. If these ancient wraiths came from people similar to his own world's prehistoric humans, then they were the most devastating of predators, ruthless killers on a planetary scale.

From what little Sunny knew about history, ancient humans had spread across the whole planet like a plague, eviscerating whole types of living creatures — including all other nascent branches of the human kind — in one fell avalanche.

With their flint weapons and the knowledge of fire, they became nothing less than the cause and perpetrators of the sixth mass extinction, equal to the likes of massive asteroids and climate shifts despite their puny size and lifespan.

…He was kind of starting to miss the carapace legion.

In any case, Sunny somehow managed to kill these terrifying fighters — a few of them, at least — too. More than that, he reached into the very essence of Shadow Dance and greedily absorbed every nuance of their primeval and ferocious fighting style, and then reflected it back at the waves of Nightmare Creatures, bringing his already terrifying dance of death to a truly chilling level of brutality.

The Blood Blossom had long ago reached its limit.

Minutes passed, and despite the fact that Sunny was battered and growing dangerously tired, his reserves of shadow essence swiftly diminishing, for a few moments, he felt as though he had things under control.

That maybe… just maybe… he was going to stand his ground for the whole thirteen minutes.

And then, he realized that he would not.

As the sixth minute came to an end, a furious bellow shook the world, and something massive lunged at him from the darkness of the Gate. The barrier of corpses he had built in front of it exploded, and a giant beast — twice as tall as Sunny and weighing at least twenty times more — emerged from it in a cloud of blood and bone fragments, two empty eye sockets full of ghostly red flame.

Sunny stared at it with wide eyes.

The creature resembled a giant bison, its black fur mottled and rotten, a ridge of long, scarlet bone spikes piercing the hide along the spine. The head of the monstrosity was crowned with two jagged, bloodred horns.

'A Fallen… that thing is Fallen!'

The bison was also different from the hounds and larger beasts he had been fighting against, since it — just like the ancient hunters — was itself a wraith. A corpse reanimated by the malevolent spirit of red flame.

'Crap!'

Sunny hurriedly commanded the [Feather of Truth] to make his armor as heavy as possible and lowered his stance, knowing full well that he couldn't allow that thing to get past him.

In the next moment, two thousand kilograms of rotting flesh and sharp horns crashed into him at full speed.

'Cr…'

For a split second, everything became dark.

…Then, Sunny found himself bouncing off the asphalt and then rolling across it at a terrible speed, up until the moment a wall of a building stopped him and exploded, shards of cement flying into the air.

'Not... good…'

Disoriented, he shook his head, feeling drops of blood seep under Weaver's Mask, and then used the Shadow Serpent to help himself stand up. Then, he looked toward the Gate through the red mist clouding his sight.

The massive wraith was approaching the six terrified Awakened. Its speed, however, was slow, and its steps staggered.

There was a big hole in its forehead where the thick, adamantine bones of the skull were shattered and cracked, bits of bloody pulp spilling out of it and falling to the ground.

Just before the impact, Sunny had brought his armored fist down on it, summoning the Moonlight Shard at the last moment.

His plan was to pierce the big bastard's brain, but because of the violent force and momentum of their collision, he ended up doing that, and then punching a hole through the creature's forehead with his spiked gauntlet.

Sunny's thoughts were slow and astray, but he was already starting to regain his senses.

'I have a concussion, I think…'

Failing to breach the last few meters to the six Awakened, the bison stopped and swayed. Its legs suddenly caved, and it toppled over, sending a tremor running through the ground.

…A flood of abominations was already rushing into the breach it had created, though.

Into the empty space where Sunny had been.

Still disoriented, Sunny staggered, then raised the Soul Serpent weakly.

'Bad. This is really, really bad…'

Chapter-491: Desperate Measures

As Nightmare Creatures rushed forward, the six Awakened began to act.

The two with elemental Aspects attacked first. Something flashed in the air, and then one of them was suddenly surrounded by a swiftly spinning ring of fire. The fire disc then flew forward and collided against the mass of abominations, immolating one of the hounds and burning several more.

The other raised her hand, and a thin blade made of nothing but air whistled as it bit into the flesh of one of the hunters, severing one of his arms at the shoulder.

Sunny blinked.

[You have slain a Fallen Monster…]

The fastest of the Nightmare Creatures were already lunging at the defenders. The girl he had spoken to before took a step forward and attacked with a slender saber, striking at the neck of a spiked hound and opening its artery with a precise cut. Two more Awakened were covering her from the sides, both wielding a shield and a Memory weapon of their own — one a short sword, the other a steel pike.

The last one did something to repel the arrows that were already flying toward their bodies, but Sunny had no idea what.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

The Awakened were performing well… they acted with sufficient coordination and foresight, doing everything in their power to slow down the tide of approaching monsters. Although not elites, each of

them was a capable combatant. They were brave and determined.

…And yet, it was not going to be enough. Not nearly enough to survive, let alone prevent the invaders from escaping into the city.

[You have received a Memory.]

'What to do, what to do…'

Not fully realizing what he was doing, Sunny commanded the shadow to wrap itself around his body, and for the Soul Serpent to slither back onto his skin.

Immediately, he felt much more powerful, his head more clear. His muscles brimmed with raw strength, double what he had just a second ago. His breathing became deeper.

Sunny knew that he had to slow the abominations down, and then get back into the fight.

That was the only way...

Taking a step forward, he swayed a little, and then grabbed the roof of an abandoned PTV to help himself keep balance.

…Bending down, he then grabbed the bottom of the heavy alloy vehicle with his other hand.

Sending all of his essence rushing through his body, flooding it with as much strength as he could muster, he then growled and dug into the alloy with his fingers.

And then, sending cracks through the asphalt, Sunny strained every muscle in his body to perform one devastating, explosive push.

The window of the PTV exploded, and as its frame deformed, the whole vehicle suddenly flew into the air. It breached the distance between him and the rushing tide of Nightmare Creatures and crashed into it from the side like a bizarre cannonball, turning several dormant beasts into bloody pulp, breaking numerous bones, and sending most of the front row of abominations tumbling down.

The runes shimmered in front of Sunny, and with no time to waste, he threw just one look at them, searching for the description of his new Memory. He was only interested in one thing:

Memory Type: Weapon.

'Good enough…'

Not bothering with reading the rest, Sunny summoned the weapon and used Shadow Step to appear amid the reeling abominations.

Some had avoided his improvised ram and were already either attacking the six Awakened or escaping into the streets.

He couldn't do anything about it now.

What he could do, though…

As an ancient spear with a head crafted out of a long and sharp piece of black obsidian materialized in his hands, he thrust it into the throat of one of the wraiths, then used its back end to slam another one in the chest.

Then, Sunny spun the spear and brought it down on the head of a lunging hound, shattering its skull with one terrifying blow.

While he tried to overcome the ringing in his ears and continued to fight, more Nightmare Creatures got past him… and more still were already emerging from the Gate

'Die, die, die… die, you damn wretches, die faster!'

***

"They breached the line of defenders!"

The voice of the headmaster seemed calm, considering the situation, so the children gathered in the combat training hall of the school didn't panic, either. Nevertheless, they could feel that the adults were frightened, and that fear spread like an infection.

The children were frightened, too.

For many of the younger kids, this was the first time they experienced being near an opening Gate. Those who were older knew what to do, in theory… only none of those things could be done. There was just not enough time to evacuate or reach the nearest shelter, and so, the lessons they had learned were useless.

Everyone was gathered in the most protected place in the school — the gymnasium — and huddled together. The younger children were placed in the middle, the older ones near the edge, with the teachers standing the furthest from the center.

The combat instructors were armed with actual Memory weapons, which looked menacing and beautiful… at least to Rain, who had never seen her teacher wield one of his real weapons before.

With him, the other instructors, and a couple of bodyguards who happened to be inside the school because of those children whose parents were really important, there were five Awakened among them, each armed and ready to fight.

The other teachers and older students were armed, too, albeit with mundane weapons. Rain herself was holding her training sword, realizing for the first time how flimsy and pathetic it was. Before, the sword had always seemed to weigh a ton and be unnecessarily sharp.

Now, she wished that it was a real weapon, and not just a training one.

'What is going to happen?'

Because she happened to be standing near the headmaster, she saw her combat instructor glance at him and say something in a low voice. Rain wasn't supposed to hear it, most likely, but she did.

He said:

"It's a miracle that they held that long, really. Only seven of them… I don't know who these people are, but they should have been overwhelmed in the first minute."

'Overwhelmed? But… but… if seven Awakened were supposed to die in less than a minute, then what about the five protecting us?'

Rain suddenly felt cold and scared. The whole thing didn't seem real… how can something like this happen? This school was so prestigious and expensive, and so many important people sent their children here. Surely, the defenses…

As if answering her thoughts, muffled sounds of firing penetrated the walls and sent shivers running through everyone's bodies. The automatic turrets had gone online, which meant that there were Nightmare Creatures approaching.

Rain's father worked for the government, handling matters having to do with the logistical support of the Awakened, and although he didn't like to talk about work, she knew more about these matters than most kids of her age. Because of that, she understood how ineffective mundane weapons were against the creatures of the Spell, especially ones of higher Ranks.

So she just hoped that...

Something broke with a deafening crash, and the whole gymnasium suddenly trembled.

'...C—curses!'

Rain gripped the hilt of her sword tighter, and turned toward where the crash had come from with a pale face.

Her eyes widened.

***

Hundreds of meters away, in the mass of Nightmare Creatures, Sunny sent another abomination to hell, threw its body away, and growled.

There were so many of them! Too many!

Through the shadow hiding beside Rain, he saw that those monsters that had gotten past him and the other defenders had reached the school.

He also saw more and more creatures arriving through the gate… beasts, monsters, and demons, Awakened and Fallen… there was

simply no end to them!

And he was dead tired and growing weaker, fast.

His body was at its limit, his reserves of shadow essence were running dry, and even the Mantle of the Underworld was showing signs of straining to resist the neverending rain of blows he was not able to evade anymore.

Feeling blood streaming down his face, Sunny briefly glanced toward the distant school, then back at the gate.

And then, he shivered.

Something had changed.

Something was... coming.

In the darkness of the Gate, a new silhouette appeared.

A moment later, all the beasts that surrounded him froze, and then howled triumphantly, as if to welcome the new creature to the waking world.

The Gate Guardian had arrived.

Chapter-492: Gate Guardian

Sunny stared at the Gate, momentarily paralyzed by dread. Then, he snapped out of it and fought through exhaustion, rushing to kill as many abominations as he could before the Guardian came out of the Gate.

He had an inkling that after, there would not be an opportunity to pay them any attention.

'Is… is it the Guardian? How many minutes has it been?'

He had no idea. Somewhere along the way, Sunny had lost count of the time. All he knew was that it had not been long enough…

Meanwhile, a hulking figure emerged from the darkness of the Gate, and as it did, the red flames burning in the empty eye sockets of the ancient wraiths flashed brighter, their dead mouths opening to produce a litany of menacing howls.

'C—crap…'

The Guardian was more than four meters tall, his desiccated body resembling that of the primeval hunters and demons Sunny had fought, but at the same time much more frightening. He wielded a long spear, its blade cut out of a single slab of obsidian and covered in so many stains of ancient, dried blood that it seemed as if the stone itself had absorbed them and turned dark red.

The giant was wearing an intricate leather armor, much more robust and imposing than those of the lesser wraiths, with strips of strange, bluish iron woven onto it. His wrists bore dozens of bracelets made out of iron and bone, and on his shoulders was a cloak fashioned out of the hide of some terrifying monster.

The skull of the creature served as his helm, and his face was covered

by a disturbing burial mask, its features twisted and bestial.

The mask — and the skull on his head — each had three eyes, all six emanating intense, malevolent red radiance.

Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

'What… what is that thing…'

He didn't know what kind of a creature the ancient chieftain was, but had no doubts that he was a Fallen Tyrant… and a very powerful one, at that. Maybe the barrow these wraiths were coming from had been built to entomb this ancient menace, to begin with.

And his mask had three eyes.

…Anything with three eyes made Sunny shudder, for reasons he did not fully understand. After the Forgotten Shore, he knew that this was a sign of something too terrible for him to know.

Could he kill a Fallen Tyrant?

Maybe if he had a lot of time to prepare and study his enemy, and attacked from the shadow.

But now, with Sunny exhausted and battered, his shadow essence running out, and hundreds of Nightmare Creatures surrounding their master in bloodthirsty exaltation, he stood no chance. None at all.

Well… maybe a very tiny one.

And what else was he going to do other than try and fight, put his tail between his legs and run away?

Well… sure! Why the hell not? Sunny was not some kind of a hero, nor had he ever wanted to be one.

...But he wasn't going to run away just yet.

As the Nightmare Creatures renewed their assault with even more frenzied rage than before, he gritted his teeth and brandished the obsidian spear, feeling the primal battle style of the ancient wraiths

seep into his very bones.

Sunny was not done spilling blood…

He had a little bit of fight left in him, still.

***

In the gymnasium, silence and fear gave way to mayhem and panic.

The walls of the school had been breached, and Nightmare Creatures crawled inside, madness burning in their terrifying empty eyes.

"Back! Get back!"

The children were pushed against one of the walls, teachers standing between them and the terrible monsters with mundane weapons in their trembling hands.

The Awakened were engaged in a ferocious battle, but just the five of them were not nearly enough to stop all the abominations. It was inevitable that sooner or later, some of the abominations were bound to get through.

And soon, they did.

A giant, harrowing beast that resembled an infernal wolf, jagged red spikes growing through its black flesh and drops of saliva falling from its maw, tore free of the battle and lunged at the children.

Rain had never seen something so unstoppable.

How was anyone supposed to fight such a thing? No human possibly could…

The teachers tried, however.

Several of them drew their bows, but the arrows simply slid off the mottled black fur of the hellhound. The headmaster tried to stop the creature with a heavy pike, but was simply thrown away, the weapon flying out of his hands.

And then, there was no one else standing between the monster and the defenseless children.

***

'God… goddamit…'

Sunny was at the end of his rope. Which, in a sense, was precisely where he wanted to be.

He wasn't trying to stop the flood of Nightmare Creatures by killing all of them anymore. That was simply impossible, with how many there were, and how many were coming from the Gate every second.

He was, however, trying to draw as much attention as he could.

All of the attention, really.

And to accomplish that, he had to do one simple thing.

He had to attack the Tyrant.

How hard could it be?

'Let's find out…'

Sunny wasn't planning to get into a prolonged fight with the damn Barrow Chieftain, or whatever that thing was called. He was just going to exchange one… maybe two strikes with the scary bastard, hopefully deal him a tiny wound, and Shadow Step into safety.

Enough was enough...

He knew his limits.

Tearing through the mass of abominations, Sunny cut a bloody path toward the hulking tyrant, and finally appeared in front of him.

As soon as the burial mask with three burning red eyes turned his way, Sunny suddenly felt small and weak. The pain he felt in his battered body surged, and an involuntary groan escape from his lips.

He just wanted to stop and fall to the ground.

To kneel…

'Argh… a mind attack?! What, is that all?! Bastard, you should have met Gunlaug… learned how to really make people cower…'

And also, his own mask was much scarier than the crude thing covering the tyrant's face.

Fighting through the oppressive hex, Sunny lunged forward and raised his bloodied spear.

He didn't get a chance to attack, though.

Although it didn't seem as if the Tyrant of the Barrow was moving with haste, his hand shot toward Sunny with such terrifying speed that he barely had time to react. The giant didn't even deem it necessary to use a weapon, intending to crush him with a fist.

Making the Mantle of the Underworld as heavy as he could, Sunny turned the shaft of the spear around and held it with both hands, knowing to deflect the blow instead of blocking it.

He should have been able to…

The fist of the desiccated giant connected with the ancient spear…

…And easily shattered it, as though it was a mundane stick and not a Memory of the Ascended Rank.

Before Sunny could even feel the terrible impact reverberate through his bones, five massive fingers closed around his torso like a steel bear trap.

And squeezed.

'C—crap!'

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

What a shame... he didn't even get a chance to learn what it was called...

The stonelike metal of the Mantle of the Underworld groaned, but held.

His bones, reinforced by the steadfast temperance of the Bone Weave, held too.

Not that Sunny was having a good time. It felt as though he was being slowly crushed to death, unable to draw in a single breath. It hurt as hell, too… much worse than that, actually...

But worse still, while the tyrant had him in his grip, he couldn't use Shadow Step.

He couldn't escape.

'I... I think... I messed up…'

As Sunny struggled in the tyrant's iron grip, the giant tilted his head a little, and easily lifted him off the ground, bringing his prey closer to the three burning red eyes.

Chapter-493: Advent of Death

Sunny gritted his teeth and groaned, feeling his whole body being slowly crushed by the monstrous chieftain of the Barrow Wraiths. One of his arms was pressed against his body, and the other one was, too… but just barely.

If only he could free it…

But no matter how hard he tried, the tyrant's hold was just too strong.

…Back in the gymnasium, the terrifying beast was lunging at the defenseless children. Its maw was wide open, the red shine of the ghostly flames burning in its eyes reflecting from the jagged, sharp fangs.

It was flying directly at Rain, moments away from closing its jaw on her throat.

She felt paralyzed by fear, desperately wishing to run, but unable to move.

Was this how she was going to die? No, no… it couldn't be!

But it was...

Suddenly, a spark of a strange, dark emotion ignited in Rain's heart.

'Die? No… not like this… I refuse!'

She was holding a sword, was she not?

Even if that thing was going to devour her, Rain was determined to die fighting, just like she had been taught to. She was going to remain human, not a cowering animal only good enough to be the stronger beast's prey.

She owed that much to her parents, at least.

Knowing full well that her dull training sword was not going to stop a Nightmare Creature, Rain stubbornly made a motion to raise it. Even though her mind was panicked and her thoughts scattered, the body remembered countless hours of practice…

Not that it was going to do her any good.

The hound was already so close that she could see every harrowing detail of its hideous snout and frothing maw. There was no escape...

'Unfair! This is unfair…'

This childish thought appeared in her mind, as it had undoubtedly appeared in the minds of countless people just before they were killed.

...And then, something strange happened.

Suddenly, two beautiful magenta lights ignited in the darkness to the side of the lunging creature.

A moment later, a dark blade of a strange, stonelike sword flashed out of the shadows and easily sliced through the abomination's neck, separating its head from its torso.

A round shield made of something that resembled stone then appeared and swatted the headless body away from Rain, not allowing even a drop of blood to fall on her.

As she froze in shock, a graceful woman wearing menacing black armor stepped out of the darkness, two ruby flames burning behind the visor of her closed helmet.

Rain had never seen someone so terrifying, yet so magnificent.

The woman glanced at her with indifferent calmness, and then turned around to easily pierce another hound with her stonelike sword, then sever one more in half with a swift, vicious strike. It was as though the flesh of the abominations offered her no resistance.

'Three… she just killed three Nightmare Creatures…'

And not only that, but she also killed them in the span of a second, with a confident, relaxed ease.

'Who… who is she?'

Before Rain knew what she was doing, she heard herself saying in a small voice:

"Who are you?"

The beautiful knight did not answer and simply stood between the children and the advancing monsters, her back straight and solid like a stone wall.

Rain stared at that back, feeling as if nothing was going to get past this frightening, taciturn warrior.

A burning desire suddenly appeared in her heart.

She didn't know whether the menacing black knight was a human, a spirit, or a strange Nightmare Creature. But she knew one thing...

'Strong… I want to be strong, someday. Strong like her…'

***

In front of the gate, Sunny was slowly suffocating in the iron grip of the Fallen Tyrant. He was being brought closer and closer to the three burning red eyes, and as he did, it felt as if life itself was being sucked out of him, his mind balancing on the verge of breaking apart.

'What… the hell…'

There had to be something that he could do… some trick he could employ to wrestle free. A Memory he could summon, an enchantment he could activate…

But no matter how hard he tried, nothing worked.

Sunny's vision was slowly starting to grow dark.

'Dammit! I… I need to…'

He could have summoned the Cruel Sight if his hands were free, but they were not. He could have turned the Mantle of the Underworld too heavy for the tyrant to lift, but it was already as heavy as the [Feather of Truth] allowed, weighing as much as a small mountain… what else was there in his arsenal?!

Sunny was almost ready to panic, and then… a subtle change suddenly happened to the world.

It was easily missed or discarded, more of a feeling than an actual shift. Sunny only noticed it because it felt strangely familiar.

…It felt as though the whole world suddenly became colder by a couple of degrees.

But why would it?

Before he could properly consider the meaning of the subtle change, though, something flashed through the air, and suddenly, Sunny could breathe again.

He could do so because… because the hand holding him wasn't connected to the tyrant's body anymore, the arm severed cleanly at the elbow.

'What…'

Sunny fell to the ground and rolled away as a fountain of seething blood shot out of the stump that used to be a Wraith Chieftain's arm, evaporating and turning into a cloud of scorching red mist.

'What just happened?'

Still reeling, he struggled to stand up and saw someone landing on a piece of rubble next to him.

It was a beautiful woman who seemed to be in her late twenties. She was wearing a dark blue uniform with silver epaulets and leather boots, her short hair as black as a raven's feather, and her skin as white as snow.

Her icy blue eyes were colder than the deepest reaches of a frozen hell.

In her hand, the woman was holding a somber glaive, drops of boiling blood swiftly turning into ice on its slender blade.

She looked like... like Death herself.

'Master Jet!'

Indeed, it was Soul Reaper Jet.

...The cavalry had arrived.

Chapter-494: The Cavalry

Sunny had never been that happy to see anyone in his entire life. Master Jet arrived just in the nick of time, saving him from having to regret the decision to send Saint to aid Rain.

…Not to mention that she was really pleasant to look at.

More importantly — taking off a Fallen Tyrant's arm with one strike! Even for an Ascended, this was an incredible feat. Tyrants were not creatures one usually dared to challenge alone. Instead, they were dreaded horrors that were capable of decimating whole cohorts of experienced, battle-hardened fighters.

Masters rarely worked together, simply for the fact that there were too few of them and too much for each one to do. But facing a tyrant was one of the things that pushed them to band together. And even then, not everyone was guaranteed to return from the fight.

Truly, Teacher Julius had not been exaggerating when he said that even Saints were wary of Soul Reaper Jet.

And yet… although her entrance was spectacular, would she be able to battle the tyrant and survive? Even though the chieftain was seriously wounded, that wound came from a surprise attack. Now that she lost the advantage, things could change really fast.

As if answering his thoughts, Master Jet glanced at him.

Despite the fact that they were surrounded by piles of corpses, the terrifying giant looming above them like an omen of doom, an unexpected smile suddenly appeared on her cold face.

"...Cool mask."

With that, Soul Reaper sprung forward, turning into a blue blur. Her

movements were so fast that Sunny had only been able to perceive them because he was an Awakened, his senses vastly superior to that of a mundane human.

Several things happened at the same time.

The somber glaive flew away as it spun fast enough to appear as a blurry circle. It cut a bloody swath in the mass of abominations, eviscerating dozens in a matter of a second as it moved in a wide arc.

At the same time, Master Jet streaked across the bloodied, broken asphalt and appeared behind the tyrant, then caught the glaive and immediately lunged forward in a devastating thrust.

The chieftain was much faster, though.

His spear seemed to almost teleport into the path of the glaive, positioned for an indomitable block.

Something weird happened then.

Master Jet's weapons suddenly turned ghostly and eerily luminous, and simply passed through the shaft to the spear, then effortlessly pierced… no, phased through the creature's armor, burying itself deep in his chest.

Right where one of the soul cores should have been.

'What the…'

Things didn't go as she had planned, though. Sunny got that suspicion because of a slight frown that appeared on Jet's face, and the fact that the tyrant did not slow down even one bit.

Instead of having its soul damaged or one of his cores destroyed, the bastard simply took a step forward and raised his spear, which suddenly ignited with blinding light and flooded the area directly in front of the Gate with menacing red radiance.

Sunny sighed.

"Well… that's my cue to get the hell out of here."

This was not a battle he could handle, at least not in his current state. Master Jet seemed to have the situation under control — even if she ended up as no match for the Barrow Chieftain, she would at least be able to stall him until the rest of the government forces arrived.

Sunny, on the other hand, would probably just be erased from existence by the destructive fallout their battle was bound to produce.

Since Saint was doing fine in the gymnasium of the school, protecting both the children and the teachers, he didn't have to worry about Rain, as well.

All that was left was to do…

Was to get more shadow fragments and, hopefully, an additional Memory or two while Soul Reaper was doing the heavy lifting, of course!

'It's a good thing she arrived way faster than thirteen minutes, though… what an exemplary employee! I am starting to understand why Master Jet always seems sleep deprived. I hope the government gives her a raise…'

With that, Sunny picked himself off the ground and used Shadow Step to appear near the six Awakened, who were on the verge of being overrun by the advancing Nightmare Creatures.

Honestly, it was a miracle that all of them were still alive.

Summoning the odachi once again, Sunny cut down a hunter who had been aiming at the familiar young woman with a bow, and gave her a cursory glance.

Something exploded behind him, in the direction where Master Jet was fighting the tyrant, painting him with shades of deep red.

"L—lord Mongrel! What should we do?!"

Wasn't that obvious?

'Run, you idiots!'

Grimacing behind the fearsome black mask, Sunny opened his mouth and said, his voice full of resentment toward the fact that he had to tell such an obnoxious lie:

"Stand and fight."

The girl stared at him, a sudden expression of shame clearly written on her face.

"Of course… of course… that is what an Awakened ought to do…"

Suppressing an infuriated groan, Sunny strained his aching muscled and raised the Soul Serpent.

'What a joke! I better not see that quote going viral on the network…'

***

In the end, the Gate was contained with, miraculously, no civilian casualties.

Soon after Master Jet appeared, the government strike force finally arrived. Several swift air carriers descended from the skies in the howling of jet engines, and dozens of Awakened jumped down, all clad in high-quality armor and wielding powerful weapons.

Almost at the same time, armored vehicles appeared on the road and opened fire on the mass of Nightmare Creatures, their spelltech cannons managing to obliterate the weaker abominations and herd the more powerful ones away from the city streets.

Operated by mundane humans, these machines were meant to control the battlefield and make it easier for the Awakened to eliminate those creatures too tough for human weapons to destroy reliably.

More cohorts, machines, and mundane soldiers followed.

Master Jet, unbelievably, ended up actually killing the tyrant. The break in their battle came when she suddenly shifted from attacking the chieftain himself to aiming for the three-eyed skull he wore as a helmet.

As soon as she managed to crack the skull, the red flames burning in the eyes of the wraiths were extinguished, leaving them disoriented and weakened. Many simply fell to the ground, losing their perverted unlives.

The tyrant staggered, and then collapsed in a heap of rotten fur and desiccated flesh, sending a tremor through the bloody battlefield. This time, he was truly and utterly dead.

After that, the scales of the battle tilted drastically in the favor of humans.

Noticing a dedicated team of Awakened enter the school to secure the students, Sunny dismissed Saint and glanced at the scene of slaughter one last time.

His heart was in agony.

…Not because of the havoc and destruction that seemed to envelop once peaceful streets, but because of all the soul shards and contribution points he was going to miss out on.

'Such cruelty! Such injustice!'

Well, at least he received a very large number of shadow fragments, several Memories, and even learned a new, profound and deviously deadly battle style.

This thought did not console him very much, though.

Almost on the verge of crying, Sunny sighed…

And dissolved into the shadows.

Without saying anything or demanding any credit, Mongrel was gone just as suddenly as he had appeared. All that was left behind were scores of dead Nightmare Creatures and the memories of those who saw him fight.

And some time later, in a dark and empty alley, Awakened Sunless, who avoided the summons to defend the Gate, walked toward an especially remote corner and bent down to pick up the Covetous

Coffer, which was furtively looking out from behind a big garbage container.

Taking his communicator, Sunny patted the box on the lid and dismissed it, then stared at the screen with a dark expression.

A heavy sigh escaped from his lips.

"Ah, it's good to be a coward…"

Chapter-495: Masked Hero

By the time Sunny limped back to his house, the news of the Gate opening in a prestigious district of the city was all over the network. Luckily, the school Rain attended was situated really far away from where both of them lived — none of the mayhem had reached the terrace neighborhood, leaving it as quiet and peaceful as ever.

It was a bit strange, to see that nothing had changed here despite the fact that mere tens of minutes of riding the train away, the bodies of numerous Nightmare Creatures littered the ground. Life simply went on.

Well, it wasn't really that surprising. If people reacted strongly to every instance of a Gate appearing, nothing would ever get done, and everyone would live every day of their lives in fear. So, those not affected by the disaster directly did not allow it to disrupt their moods or routines.

People could get accustomed to anything, even the constant possibility of terrifying monsters suddenly coming out of an infernal rift in reality on their street. As long as important parts of city infrastructure weren't damaged, no one was going to care that much.

And even if they were, citizens knew how to adapt — public transport would be rerouted, power outages would be dealt with by switching to autonomous generators or simply using candles, and so on.

The Gate was contained, the impact area was already being cleaned by the government workers. When tomorrow came, the cafe Sunny had visited would be open again, as if nothing happened. Life would return to normal.

...And those who had experienced the terror of the Gate firsthand would go on, silently bearing an invisible scar on their heart. But that

was alright, too. Collecting scars was something that everyone who lived in this world had to do as they matured. This was the reality of the Nightmare Spell.

'Why am I suddenly in a philosophical mood?'

Sunny shook his head, then scoffed and opened the door of his home.

Effie was in the living room, taking advantage of the state-of-the-art entertainment system Sunny had bought and paid for. When she saw him, a surprised expression appeared on her face.

"Gods, what happened to you? Did a piano fall on your head?"

'What a strange question…'

Sunny sighed, then glanced at her arkly.

"No. A Gate fell on my head… sort of. Damned thing opened right near a cafe I sometimes visit. They sell incredible pastries, so… good news is, I managed to finish my pastry! Before getting the hell out."

Effie gave him a shocked look.

"Goodness! You were near that mess? I heard that the government barely gave people time to evacuate this time."

Sunny shrugged.

"Near, yes."

The young woman stared at him, then grinned.

"So… how many contribution points did you get? Enough to upgrade the entertainment system, maybe? You won't believe the quality of the haptic interfaces these days… I mean, you don't have to if you don't want to, of course. Just something to consider…"

He gritted his teeth and let out a frustrated sigh.

"None! I didn't get anything, okay?!"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then looked at him with a bit of

disappointment.

"Well… no need to get emotional. There's no shame in avoiding such fights. Everyone wants to live, you know."

Sunny waved a hand dejectedly, then turned around.

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, I'll go take a bath. Have fun."

Leaving his guest… well, more like an uninvited housemate… alone in the living room, Sunny went away and prepared an ice bath for himself.

When he lowered his aching body into the cold water and endured the initial shock, a pleasant numbness enveloped him. Sunny glanced at the tapestry of bruises covering his skin, and sighed.

'Can I still be considered pale if I am mostly black and purple? Gee, I always wanted to stop being pasty. But not like this…'

He closed his eyes and relaxed, enjoying the ice bath. None of his wounds were serious enough to really worry about, so he just had to wait for his body to heal itself. That was going to take a few days, which Sunny was fully intending to spend lazing about and doing nothing.

Wasn't that the dream?

After a while, he got a bit bored and decided to do something productive. He could either check on how much he had gained in the bloody battle, or see if someone had come close to connecting him to Mongrel.

Sunny thought for a few moments, then reached for his communicator.

'Let's see the extent of the damage first…'

A few moments later, a low groan escaped from his lips.

"Oh for Spell's sake…"

***

"Shocking news! Mysterious online sensation Mongrel returns to single-handedly contain a Category Two Gate!"

"In the Shadow of a Lord: Mongrel's heroic stand caught on camera!"

"Who is Lord Mongrel, the courageous hero that everyone is talking about? The answer might shock you!"

"WE KNEW IT ALL ALONG! Mongrel is a woman confirmed!"

"STAND AND FIGHT: words to live by. Mongrel refuses to give up!"

Sunny stared at the screen of the communicator with resentment, then suppressed the desire to crush it in his fist.

'What is wrong with people?!'

Apparently, a bit of his recent performance had been caught on tape. The shockwave of an opening Gate was supposed to mess with electronics, but one camera had miraculously survived.

The image was really grainy and stuttered every few seconds, but he could make out a dark figure moving through the mass of Nightmare Creatures, the Soul Serpent flashing through the bloody mist, its blade surrounded by a halo of black radiance.

The battle style of the Barrow Wraiths and his need to spill as much blood as possible added an extra layer of brutality to the recording, making him seem like a demon that had escaped from some lightless hell.

Sunny grimaced as if in pain, and tentatively looked down, on the views counter beneath the video.

When he saw it, the communicator slipped from his hand and fell into the water.

Good thing it was waterproof...

'Damnation… well, you've done did it now, fool! Congratulations!

You've gone mainstream…'

Chapter-496: Stand and Fight

"Today, a terrible tragedy almost happened in a peaceful and prosperous part of the city. It was a day like any other, until a sudden notification alerted the citizens that a Gate was about to open nearby.

With no time to evacuate, numerous people were going to die… but then, a courageous Awakened placed himself in the way of Nightmare Creatures, holding off the entire advancing horde by himself and refusing to give ground until the government forces arrived!

This hero then disappeared without demanding any reward, not leaving even his name behind — only scores of slaughtered monsters and numerous saved lives. Who is this brave and modest savior? Where did he come from, and what is his true identity? Well, some readers might recognize him as the viral Dreamscape sensation, Mongrel…"

Sunny stared at the communicator, which had water dripping from it, with a dark expression on his face.

'An official newspaper… this is a damn published article, not a random network thread!'

Previously, Sunny had only gone really viral among the people who were interested in the Dreamscape and dueling. Even though the recording of his performance in the Colosseum reached a wider audience, most of the people who had seen it did not pay Mongrel a lot of attention, since they didn't understand the details of his achievements.

This one, however… this one was different. Everyone could relate to a Gate opening and knew how terrifying and calamitous such an event could be. So, the new video showed Mongrel in a context that revealed just how bizarre and exceptional his deeds were to

everyone.

Add to that the fact that the combination of the Mantle of the Underworld, the Soul Serpent, and Weaver's Mask looked really striking and menacing, and that — miraculously — no civilian had died despite the late warning by the government, and Sunny found himself in a sea of trouble.

Suddenly, he was happy with the fact that he had not been able to augment himself with both of his shadows. At least his physical prowess did not seem too out of the realm of humanly possible… or rather, possible for an Awakened.

The other good news was that there, thankfully, was no recording of Saint. The cameras in the school had been properly damaged, and for that reason, people only knew of her by verbal description.

…Which caused its own share of problems because of how similar the Mantle of the Underworld was to her armor. Due to that and the nature of how rumors distorted the truth the more they were shared, soon, many people were convinced that Mongrel had protected the children in the school personally.

And that led some to become convinced that Mongrel… was a woman.

Sunny tiredly covered his face with a hand.

His worst fears had not come true, though. Despite the fact that the recording showed him using Shadow Step, no one learned the true nature of his Ability from the grainy image, and no one connected him and Mongrel together.

Maybe because of the ridiculous way A Song of Light and Darkness portrayed Sunny, but no one even tried to assume that Changing Star's bumbling sidekick was actually the dark, deadly, demonic swordsman Mongrel.

Instead, there were countless discussions like this:

Mongrail_Seeker: "New information on Mongrel's Aspect! Previously, we all thought that his Ability had to do with physical enhancement

or perception, right? But we were all wrong! The new video clearly shows that his Aspect is actually spatial sorcery!"

Spirit of the Colosseum: "Do you realize what that means? It means that he didn't even use his Aspect in the Dreamscape duels! That was all just pure skill. Crazy!"

Anonymous User: "...You mean HER Aspect?"

Mongrail_Seeker: "Heresy! Lord Mongrel is not a her!"

Anonymous User: "...You mean LADY Mongrel?"

Spirit of the Colosseum: "I better ping @Mongrel's Son. He should know who his dad is!"

Anonymous User: "... You mean his MOM?"

Sunny let out an infuriated sigh.

'Well, at least no one is mentioning me. If you think about it, the more people think that Mongrel is a lady, the better. Yes, this is good! No, seriously… so good… curse them all…'

And of course, there were a lot of nonsensical threads assigning some deep and profound meaning to every stupid lie he had said.

Like: "I am just a human: Mongrel reminds us of the only truth. There are no mundanes or Awakened, only humans and the Nightmare Creatures. He knows that everyone is equal before the Spell…"

Or: "Make them bleed! Wow, I have no words. So cool… how can anyone be so cool? At the end of the day, that is all that any of us can do. Repay each drop of human blood the Nightmare Creatures spill with a river of their own..."

But mostly, it was the damned idiotic advice he had given to one of the six Awakened near the end: "Stand and fight… am I the only one who got shivers after hearing that? Such a simple, but all-encompassing adage. Lord Mongrel, he is a true Awakened…"

Everywhere he looked, it was the same three words. So many people

were repeating, praising, and adding them to their bios that Sunny wanted to vomit.

'What is happening…'

As people continued to watch the recording and discuss it, the truth got hazier and hazier. Pretty soon, everyone seemed to have forgotten that Sunny had not actually contained the Gate by his lonesome self.

No one mentioned Master Jet, who had literally saved his skin and took on the Guardian alone, eventually defeating the Fallen Tyrant without a cohort of Masters supporting her. No one mentioned the six Awakened who had helped him, and a literal army of government soldiers who had done the really heavy lifting and wiped out the entire horde, which he had only stalled until their arrival.

It was all Mongrel and his courageous, selfless, heroic stand against numerous Nightmare Creatures, as if he was some sort of a fearless, slaughtering demigod.

'It's almost like no one even cares about the truth!'

Sunny threw the communicator on the pile of clothes and closed his eyes in frustration.

…It was a very strange sentiment. The irony was not lost on him one bit.

'Curses… who knew that I would be lamenting a lack of truth one day? Me, of all people! What is this situation?!'

Indeed, making Sunny care about the truth was not easy.

It was no simple trick…

Chapter-497: Unexpected Turn

Eventually, Sunny climbed out of the bath, dressed himself, and moved to the kitchen to make himself something to eat.

After the intense gauntlet of the Gate battle, he was hungry like a wolf. Ravenous, really...

Cooking calmed him down a little, and the pleasant smell made his mood a bit better. Now that Sunny had some time to think, he saw the whole situation in a new light.

Yes, his hope for Mongrel to be forgotten was utterly shattered. But there was a bright side to this fiasco — now that he had completely failed to keep a low profile... there was no more reason to. Which meant that he could resume practicing Shadow Dance in the Dreamscape, and hopefully master its second step before winter came.

He just had to rethink how he viewed the persona of Mongrel.

Initially, Sunny had planned for it to be unseen and anonymous, merely a camouflage he would put on to accomplish certain things — things that were inconvenient or too dangerous to be tied to his own name.

...Well, that ship had sailed. He was pretty sure that from now on, anything having to do with Mongrel was going to be at the center of people's attention.

But that wasn't necessarily bad. There were ways to remain unseen even in the spotlight. In fact, sometimes it was easier — all magicians knew that the secret to pulling off a flawless trick was not to become invisible, but to direct the crowd's attention toward something eye-catching and away from the hand performing the switch.

Sunny was not a magician, but he did consider himself to be an experienced cheat. The principle was more or less the same.

So if he played his cards right, the more attention Mongrel received, the more freedom he would have to move unseen in the shadows, accomplishing his goals under everyone's noses with no one being the wiser.

"Maybe…"

Such a thing was hard to accomplish and hid more risk, but also promised a greater reward. So, not all was lost.

Plus, he had protected Rain. That was the only thing that really mattered. Everything else paled in comparison.

Sunny finished his decadently generous dinner and moved to the porch. Sitting in the shade, he relaxed, grimaced a little due to pain, and took a sip of tea.

He was suddenly in a great mood. And why wouldn't he be? It was finally time to take a look at his spoils. The battle might have been hard and had almost cost him his life, but he had not fought for nothing.

Summoning the runes, Sunny glanced at the familiar string of them and smiled.

Shadow Fragments: [1814/2000].

'Incredible…'

In just ten or so minutes, Sunny had gained more shadow fragments than he usually did in weeks.

From what Sunny remembered, he slaughtered almost a hundred Nightmare Creatures in front of the Gate. Granted, most of them were of the Dormant Rank and had not contributed any fragments to his growing cores, but still, it was a monumental accomplishment.

It made him think back to the first abomination he had ever slain, the Mountain King's Larva. How tense and terrifying that fight had been,

how convinced he was that the perverse creature would kill him. Who would have thought that one day in a not-too-distant future, he would be able to slaughter a hundred Nightmare Creatures of similar and greater power without being torn to pieces?

Sunny had come so far…

Lowering his gaze, he glanced at the runes describing his Memories and couldn't contain a delighted grin.

'Oh, I was so lucky today…'

Without even counting the obsidian spear he had gotten and then swiftly lost to the tyrant, there were six new Memories in his arsenal, most of them of the Awakened Rank.

Sunny studied them for a bit and, coming to the conclusion that none were better than his current ones or performed something he wasn't already capable of, dove into the Soul Sea.

He fed the Memories to Saint and looked at her runes, satisfied with what he saw:

Shadow Fragments: [179/200].

'So close…'

At this rate, he would probably be able to reach the full two hundred before having to go into battle with the vine creature inhabiting the wreck of the ancient ship. If Saint grew even more powerful before then, her presence was going to change a lot of things.

Sunny drank his tea in the peaceful silence of the terrace district, grimacing from time to time because of the pain in his bruised body. But even the pain couldn't spoil his mood.

"Ah, today was a good day…"

He watched Rain be brought home in a PTV, made sure that she was fine… well, as fine as a young girl could be after experiencing a close brush with an opening Gate… and went inside.

He was due for some well-deserved rest.

***

In the evening, when the sun hid behind the horizon and the street lamps were flooding the city with pale white light, Sunny was resting in his living room, doing nothing in particular. He was lazily scrolling through the pages of a popular webtoon and appreciating the twists and turns of its simple story.

'Crazy. Do people really think about such stuff?'

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a strange sound. It took Sunny a couple of seconds to realize what it was, since he had never heard it in this house before.

Someone was knocking on the door.

'What the hell…'

Who could be visiting him at this late hour?

Putting the communicator away, Sunny sent his shadow to take a look and scratched the back of his head in confusion.

…Standing on his porch was none other than Rain, wearing her cozy home clothes and looking uncharacteristically nervous.

'What is she doing here?'

For a moment, Sunny considered pretending that he wasn't home, but then sighed and stood up. There was no point in hiding, since they literally lived almost next to each other. Walking over to the door, he lingered a second or two, made sure that none of his bruises were showing, and then opened it.

"Uh… yeah? What's up?"

Not knowing that Sunny had already seen how nervous she was, Rain pretended to be calm and gave him a polite smile.

"Hey, Sunny. I… the food container? Mom wants it back."

He stared at her for a couple of seconds.

"Oh. Wait here…"

He walked to the kitchen, retrieved the container from the dishwasher machine, and returned to the porch.

"Here. Tell your mom that her cooking is delicious. We really enjoyed it!"

Rain took the container, but didn't leave. Instead, she just stood there silently, looking at him with a tense expression.

Sunny frowned.

"Can I…"

But at that exact moment, she suddenly blurted out:

"I know who you are!"

If Sunny had a drink in hand, he would undoubtedly do a spit take.

'What?!'

As his heart almost stopped, he looked at Rain with a deadpan expression. Maintaining it cost him a lot, though.

'What does she think she knows?!'

"...Well, of course you know who I am. I introduced myself when we met for the first time, didn't I?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. After a bit of an awkward pause, Rain said:

"No, I mean… I know that you are an Awakened."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, but before he could come up with something to say, she hurriedly continued:

"Sorry! It's just… my dad works for the government, so he knows such things. You are so young, with no parents, but are able to afford

a house in this neighborhood. Plus, you don't go to a university or to work. So… you are an Awakened, aren't you?"

'Solid reasoning...'

He hesitated, then simply shrugged.

"Sure. Not like it's a big secret, anyway."

Rain remained silent for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Are you any good?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit. Then, a grin slowly appeared on his face.

"Me? Oh... the best of the best! Probably the strongest Awakened in the world, really. No one else can even compare."

A slight scowl appeared on Rain's face.

"I'm being serious! Are you any good or not?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then sighed.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Why are you asking?"

Rain looked at him for a while, as if gathering courage.

Then, she clenched her fists and blurted:

"Can… can you train me?"

Sunny stared at her, dumbfounded.

'Well, I'll be damned. That took an unexpected turn...'

Chapter-498: Superficial Connection

'Train her…'

Wasn't that exactly what he wanted?

It was.

But wasn't it also exactly what he wanted to avoid?

Yes, it was that too.

Sunny was in a strange predicament. The solution to the problem that had tormented him for many months had suddenly fallen right into his lap out of nowhere, but to make use of it, he had to do something that went against all his previous reservations.

He didn't want Rain to be connected to him in any way. If Sunny was honest with himself, he had to admit that he was drawn to her… or rather, to the faint, half-forgotten memories of a different, happy time that she represented. His desire to reconnect with Rain was both selfish and misguided, since he knew that nothing was going to bring those memories back to life.

…And if Sunny was really honest, he had to admit that deep down, he harbored a lot of resentment toward her, too. For having a loving family while he had none, for being fine. For not needing him at all.

What a mess of emotions that was! And if there was one thing Sunny was really bad at dealing with, it was his feelings. For him, fighting hordes of Nightmare Creatures was much easier.

And then, as if his inner turmoil was not enough, there were external forces at play, too. There was his [Fated] Attribute, the strange

connection he had to Weaver, and Nephis with her murderous feud against the Sovereigns and the inhuman will to see the Spell destroyed.

The more he and Rain were connected, the higher were the chances of her being implicated in all this. But…

Maybe, as long as they only had a shallow connection between a kid from an affluent family and her hired tutor, things weren't going to get out of hand.

He also had to consider that the threat posed by a potential First Nightmare was much greater than that of being superficially tied to him. After all, Sunny had not done anything to attract the really dangerous kind of attention… or rather, had not been caught doing anything like that yet.

…While he was torn between these conflicting thoughts, Rain waited patiently, and then, misjudging his silence, said:

"Oh! Of course, I will pay you. I have some money saved for a trip, and… well, I can also talk to my parents. It's just that you're the only Awakened I know… you know? Apart from my combat instructor in school."

Sunny looked at her, a deep frown on his face. Eventually, he asked:

"What brought upon this conversation? Why do you suddenly want someone to train you? You said it yourself, you already have a combat instructor. I thought you rich kids get taught everything you need in school."

Rain suddenly grew quiet and looked away.

After a while, she said:

"Ah, that… you probably haven't heard, but there was a… there was a Gate that opened near my school today. Many people almost died. I saw a real Nightmare Creature, even. It was… was this close to me. An Awakened like you won't probably understand how it feels, right? Oh!

Sorry, what am I saying? Of course you'd understand. I mean… what I meant to say is that I was absolutely powerless, and that was… not a nice feeling. Not a nice feeling at all."

She glanced at him, and said with a suddenly serious voice:

"So I want to become strong. Really strong. Strong enough to never feel that way again."

Sunny almost laughed.

'Oh, what irony… here we are, so different and in such different situations, but our desires are completely the same. Become stronger, so much stronger. As strong as one could possibly be…'

Rain paused for a few moments, and then added:

"And what we are taught in school is not nearly enough. At least… at least it wasn't today. Some of my classmates have private tutors that their parents hire for them, real Awakened fighters. But it's just a question of status to them. They don't really learn… or if they do, I didn't see it make any difference when the Nightmare Creatures were trying to kill us…"

Sunny smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"That's because a thousand hours of training will never be as impactful as one real fight. My own… mentor told me that once."

He hesitated for a second, and then sighed.

"I myself was trained by a very special person. The best fighter I have ever met, and probably ever will. The funny thing is, though, I sort of swindled her into teaching me how to handle a sword. Felt a little guilty about it ever since. So I guess it won't hurt to pay it forward and help someone like you out."

Sunny looked at Rain with a dark expression, realizing that he had already made a decision.

'Ah, to hell with this... why make things complicated when they are actually really simple?'

He shook his head.

"Be warned, though. If you want me to train you, I will really train you. It's going to be hard as hell and hurt a lot. I don't want to hear any complaints, or see you slacking off. Understood?"

Rain suddenly giggled.

Sunny scowled.

"What's so funny?"

She waved a hand.

"Sorry! Sorry. It's just… it's funny when you act all strict and serious, because you, you know… are barely older than me. But I do understand. I'll work hard, I promise."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then said in a low voice:

"What do you mean, barely older than you? I'm ages older than you! Just half the crap I've seen would be enough for a few lifetimes of the likes of you!"

Then, he smiled menacingly and added:

"Oh, and by the way, I also won't be cheap! I have mouths to feed, you know. That guest you've seen… I can't seem to get her to leave. There's also a stone-hearted beauty who always follows me around, and her diet is unreasonably expensive. But what can I do, attracting women with terrifying appetites seems to be my curse…"

He sighed, looked at Rain, and added:

"But if you still didn't change your mind, then fine. I'll train you, Rain…"

Chapter-499: Somewhere Far Away…

…Somewhere far away, in the depths of an endless and inescapable nightmare, a blinding disc of an incandescent sun was bathing the dunes of a vast desert in a flood of immolating heat. The sands of the desert were flawlessly white, and the azure sky above them was deep and boundless like an ancient ocean, with not a single cloud blemishing its silken expanse.

Being battered by the heat, a lone figure moved across the sand.

It was a young woman with striking grey eyes, her skin covered in terrible burns, her silver hair dirty with blood and surrounded by a radiant halo of reflected light. She wore charred remains of a shattered armor, and wielded a broken sword, its silver blade fractured and ending in a jagged edge close to the hilt.

The young woman walked forward, the trail of her footprints stretching far into the distance and disappearing over the horizon. To her left, there was nothing but an endless sea of white dunes; to her right, a line of black mountains eventually created a boundary for the scorching desert.

Far ahead, there was a tree with scarlet leaves and a scattering of something that looked like pale fruit hanging from its wide branches.

...This was where Nephis was headed.

She had to reach the tree before the night came, or… no, it was better not to think of it.

Her water had long run out, and the thirst was slowly taking hold of her mind. Her tortured body was a sea of pain, but she could still walk. She could still fight.

She was still not willing to give up.

…After a while, the tree grew closer.

Nephis stopped and stared at its white bark, its scarlet leaves, and the shapes she had thought were fruit. But they weren't. Instead, tens of thousands of skulls hung from the beautiful branches, fastened to them with glistening threads of black silk.

A spring of water formed a clear pool in the shadow of the great tree, and on its bank, with his back to her, stood a figure clad in a strange, rusted armor.

'A… human?'

No… the figure was too tall to be one of her kind.

As if hearing her thoughts, the creature turned around, revealing a desiccated face of a corpse, hollow eyes emanating ominous blue radiance, and six hands, each grasping the hilt of a weapon. Two hands held long swords, their blades sharper than a razor and curved slightly, two hands held menacing twisted sickles, and the last two held a heavy scepter and a broken shield.

The chestplate of the creature's rusted armor was shattered, revealing a harrowing wound beneath.

Being consumed by thirst and exhaustion, Nephis raised a hand, as if begging the creature to stop.

But, of course, it didn't.

With furious madness burning in its eyes, the abomination lunged at her, striking down with one of the sickles. It moved faster than lightning, sending a scarlet cloud of fallen leaves swirling into the air with a strong gust of wind.

Taking a step back, Nephis raised her broken sword to deflect the devastating strike, as if forgetting that it had no blade.

At the last moment, though, a ray of pure sunlight appeared where the blade should have been and stopped the sickle from rending her

flesh.

Nephis swayed from the force of the impact, but remained standing. Her cracked lips opened, and a hoarse whisper escaped from them:

"Let us burn, then… let us burn together…"

In the next moment, white flames ignited in her eyes.

Her skin suddenly shone with pure radiance, which then became brighter, and brighter… and then, brighter still.

Throwing the sickle away, she dodged two thrusting swords and danced around the armored giant, her blade of sunlight piercing the rusted armor with terrifying ease.

The two of them fought in the shade of the ancient tree, thousands of skulls staring at their battle with empty eyes as they swayed in the wind.

Nephis was much slower and weaker than the six-armed demon, but her skill was flawless, inexplicable, and deadly. She moved with the flow of the battle as if it was her natural element, controlling its cadence with indifferent ease. Her flesh mended itself seconds after being torn, and the flames burning in her eyes only grew hotter.

Deathly pale from the harrowing pain, her beautiful face grew colder and colder, becoming almost inhuman.

Her sword of sunlight, meanwhile, left molten marks on the body of the ancient demon. And even though such wounds could never harm it, after a while, the creature suddenly staggered.

…Of course, it did. That was a Memory left behind by the Nameless Sun of the Forgotten Shore, after all. Everything it touched was doomed to have its soul destroyed.

Finally, Nephis managed to find an opening and dashed forward, slashing upward with the Nameless Sun. The sunlight blade cut through the rusted armor and severed one of the demon's arms, then fell down and sliced through another.

Before the creature could recover, she was already upon it. Nephis sidestepped a crushing blow of the heavy scepter and placed her hand on the demon's face.

The creature froze, and then opened its mouth, as if to scream.

…However, all that escaped from it were dancing tongues of white flame.

As the pure radiance enveloping Neph's skin dimmed, it was as though the demon burned from within. Flaming fissures opened on its body, leaking pristine fire and radiating annihilating heat. His flesh boiled and blacked, and eventually, the blue shine of his eyes was replaced with blinding white light.

And then, that light was extinguished, leaving two dark, charred holes behind.

Nephis let go of the creature's face, and watched as its scorched body fell to the ground.

She stared at it for a few moments, and then indifferently turned away. Making a few steps forward, Nephis swayed and fell to her knees.

Then, she reached into the pool with trembling hands, put her palms together, and brought a handful of cold, sweet water to her lips.

Finally, her terrible thirst could be quenched.

Chapter-500: ...In the Depths of a Nightmare

After drinking her fill, Nephis sat silently on the edge of the pool for a while, staring into the distance.

Her eyes, however, were moving, as if reading an invisible book that floated in the air above the calm waters.

Some time later, a pale shadow of a smile touched her lips.

'That guy… he did something crazy again, didn't he?'

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

'How is he so fast…'

In the past months… years, lifetimes?... spent traversing the Dream Realm, surrounded by nothing except for pain and bloodshed, Nephis had started doubting the memories of her previous life. Sometimes, all of it seemed like something that she had simply imagined… a bittersweet dream she had invented to escape from the horrors of the real world. This world.

The world of neverending nightmares.

The change of the runes describing Sunny was the only connection she had left to the actual reality. Perhaps, it was the only thing keeping her sane.

...Even if the things she saw in the shimmering runes were sometimes hard to believe.

The impossible Lineage that should not have existed, the divine Memory of the seventh Rank, the strange essence of his soul, the true

nature of the taciturn stone demon… and of course, of his Flaw.

It seemed that Sunny had many more secrets than Nephis had suspected. With that knowledge, many things made much more sense now… but at the same time, many others seemed much more incredible.

Well, it was not like she didn't have secrets of her own.

And anyway, it was all in the past.

Everything was in the past.

All that remained was the future.

...She did hope that he was doing well, though, out there in the real world. With Cassie...

Looking up from the water, Nephis shifted her gaze to the ancient tree and saw two weathered skeletons cruelly nailed to its white bark. Both stared at her with empty eyes, their teeth bared in eternal grins.

After some time, one of the skeletons said:

"My, oh my. Am I that pleasant to look at?"

The other grated its teeth and let out a creaky growl, then strained, trying to wrestle free of the large silver nails impaling it to the tree. However, no matter how furiously it struggled, the nails held true.

Nephis looked at the skeletons with a calm expression, no emotion reflecting in her cold, grey eyes.

The first skeleton spoke again:

"Is that… is that living blood I smell? Gods! What terrible sins have you committed, girl, to be cast into this hell alive? Even for a revolting nephilim like you, this is too harsh of a punishment."

Finally, she opened her mouth and said hoarsely, in a voice of a person who had almost forgotten how to speak:

"...What language do you use?"

The skeleton laughed.

"The only language there is in this place, of course. Why? Do you wish to learn it?"

Nephis remained silent for a long time, and then said:

"I seek a way back to the waking world. Do you know how to escape this place?"

The skeleton stared at her with a grin.

"The waking world? What is that?"

The second skeleton suddenly spoke, his voice deep and full of rage:

"Can't you smell the stench of a daemon on this abominable thing? She is one of Weaver's, you fool!"

The first skeleton turned its skull a little, and then asked:

"Is that so? My, oh my. In that case, you will not find guides better than the two of us. Just take us off this damned tree, and we will lead you to wherever you want."

Nephis stared at them for a while, then turned away.

"...I don't need two guides. Which one should I pick?"

The second skeleton strained to free himself again, and then roared:

"I am Azarax the Mighty, the Plague of Steel, King of Kings, conqueror of a hundred thrones! Choose me, nephilim! I will guide you to the shores of the Underworld and through its dark expanse, back to the world of the living! You will need a powerful guide if you wish to escape!"

She spared him a glance, then said to the other one:

"...What about you?"

The first skeleton answered in an aloof tone:

"Me? Oh, I am no one. Just a humble slave."

Nephis lingered for a bit. Finally, she asked:

"Why are… the two of you… nailed to this tree?"

The skeleton who had called himself Azarax growled:

"Don't you know where you are, abominable creature?! I am here because I led my armies into the great war, slaughtered a myriad of souls, and was punished for my strength and my pride!"

She shifted her gaze to the other one.

The first skeleton answered succinctly:

"I have angered the gods."

Nephis tilted her head a little.

"How?"

The skeleton sighed with regret.

"Well, if you must know... I slit a god's throat. My, oh my! One could say that it was a misunderstanding. Was there really a need to be so petty?"

The sun was already falling behind the horizon, and chilling cold was spreading across the white desert. Nephis summoned her white cloak and wrapped herself in it, shivering.

Soon, night descended upon the world, revealing a myriad of bright stars. As it did, the sand moved, and slowly, countless figures rose from beneath it. All of them were corpses with no flesh remaining of their perfectly black bones, some of creatures that resembled humans, some of towering giants, and some of beings who were too strange and terrifying to describe.

In a clamor of rusted armor and a litany of howls, the hordes of

abominations clashed against each other, continuing their terrible battle even in death.

Nephis moved closer to the tree, which somehow remained an isle of calm in the sea of terror, and looked at the first skeleton.

"You… remind me of someone I knew. Come morning, I will take you off the tree. To guide me though."

The skeleton cackled.

"Very well, vile creature. Even though you are revolting, I will keep my promise."

Nephis grinned.

"...What do I call you, then?"

The skeleton remained silent for a bit.

"A name? I used to have one of those, before. What was it? Oh!"

He moved its jaw a little, and then said:

"Eurys. Eurys of the Nine…"

Chapter-501: Step Two

As waves of summer heat assaulted the city, its concrete and alloy jungle had turned into a sweltering oven. The air filtration systems were running without pause to save the people from suffocating in the clouds of pollutants, and in poorer districts, water had to be rationed because of the draught.

…Luckily, none of that touched the peaceful terrace neighborhood.

Here, people leisurely enjoyed the warm weather in the cool shade of the tall trees when they had free time, had unlimited access to fresh water and delightfully cold drinks, and lived their lives seemingly without a care in the world.

Sunny was constantly surprised to find himself among these fortunate and prosperous people.

For the past month, his life was very busy, but without any distress. He had been steadily working toward his various goals, slowly making progress toward each. His shadow fragments were nearing full saturation, and so were Saint's.

He had returned to the Dreamscape and participated in countless duels in the professional arenas, where the fighters were much more capable and gave him the opportunity to witness — and comprehend — many different battle styles. As the result, Sunny was able to further develop Shadow Dance, making his mastery of it much more solid.

The [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment of the Mantle was now also very different from how it had been before. Even if he wasn't going to reach the mark — six thousand defeated opponents — any time soon… or even a third of it… he was still making consistent progress. The counter already showed [1579/6000].

The drawback, of course, was that with each day he went without losing a fight, Mongrel received more and more praise and attention. These days, each of his duels gathered an audience as large as that of the top Dreamscape broadcasters… especially because some sort of a yearly tournament seemed to be approaching.

Mongrel's fans, however, were doomed to be bitterly disappointed. Sunny had no plans of participating in a foolish imaginary competition. He didn't care about fame and recognition, and was too busy to even spare it a thought.

Apart from practicing Shadow Dance, he also continued training with Effie and Saint, slowly bringing his mastery of the spear close to that of his knowledge of the sword. He also had to run the Brilliant Emporium, which was quickly blossoming into an actual enterprise thanks to Aiko's management and hard work.

…And of course, he had been training Rain.

"Come on! Seriously?"

She was currently in his living room, staring at him with outrage.

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Sure. What seems to be the problem?"

Rain opened her mouth, then shook her head.

"Listen, Sunny, I understand that you are the teacher, I really do. But! It has already been a month, and all you taught me were wilderness survival lessons. And one — only one! — strike, which I had repeated thousands of times already. When I asked you to train me, I thought…"

Sunny grinned.

"You thought what? That I will teach you how to decimate Nightmare Creatures and bring all your enemies to their knees?"

She coughed in embarrassment, then said in a small voice:

"...Yes?"

He shrugged.

"But that is exactly what I am teaching you. Who do you think survives in the Dream Realm? The best swordsmen? The strongest fighter? No. You need to be alive to fight a Nightmare Creature, and for that, you need to know how to find food, water, how to read tracks and move through the environment without letting it kill you.

And it will try to kill you, believe me."

He paused, then added:

"Yes, they taught you the basics in school, but not nearly enough. You want to live long enough to become strong? Then this is step one."

Rain let out a long sigh, and then looked at Effie for support.

The huntress was currently balancing in her wheelchair with a bored expression on her face, waiting at the door for some snacks she had ordered to arrive.

"...What? Listen to Sunny, kid. He might look like a wet weasel, but this guy knows his stuff. The things he lived through are simply beyond reason. Honestly, if he had any shame, he would be dead."

Sunny spared her a dark glance, and said:

"Thanks. I guess."

Rain frowned, accepting her defeat. A few moments later, she suddenly asked:

"What's step two?"

He raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"You said that learning to navigate the environment without dying is step one. What's step two?"

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, then said:

"It's about your mindset. You're not ready for step two yet, though. We'll get to it when the time is right."

…For someone like Rain, that step was going to be the hardest. She didn't really have an aptitude for violence, yet, because her life so far had been nice and soft. But she would have to not only come to terms with violence, but also adopt it into the very core of her being, make it one of the cornerstones of her self. That was the only way to survive the Spell.

Ironically, for Sunny, that step had been the easiest. In fact, he had made it long before his First Nightmare, long before the Spell even knew of his existence.

Rain stared at him with disappointment, then sighed.

"...I just want to be strong like her."

He blinked a couple of times.

"Uh… like who?"

Rain suddenly smiled.

"The Awakened who saved me. She is so amazing! So strong, so beautiful. A true warrior, not someone like you…"

Suddenly, a mortified expression replaced her wistful smile.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't mean it like that… you are great, too, Sunny! I'm sure! Just, you know… not on her level."

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then said in a strange tone:

"...Sure. No offense taken. Not everyone is made to be a true warrior, that's right."

He wanted to say something else, but at that moment, his communicator suddenly rang, announcing an incoming call. Sunny frowned.

'Who might it be?'

Very few people ever called him. Looking at the screen, he suddenly felt a bit cold.

…It was the Soul Reaper herself, Ascended Jet.

'What?! Why… why is she calling me?!'

Sunny hesitated for a couple of moments, then answered the call:

"Uh… yes? Master Jet?"

The familiar voice, as relaxed as ever, came out of the speaker:

"Oh, hey there, Awakened Sunless. Are you free right now?"

'What does she want?'

He glanced at Rain, thought for a bit, then said cautiously:

"Sort of. Why?"

For a few moments, there was nothing but static and the sound of a PTV moving coming out of the communicator.

Then, Master Jet asked:

"...Mind lending me a hand?"

Chapter-502: Sudden Request

A strange expression appeared on Sunny's face.

'Lend her a hand? Me? Why would a Master need help from an Awakened?'

Meanwhile, Master Jet added:

"You'll be generously rewarded, of course. Well… I can't guarantee the generous part, really, but there will definitely be a reward."

His eyes gleamed.

"Really? What kind?"

She chuckled.

"A fair share of contribution points? Enough to exchange for a decent Memory, at least. Plus, didn't you say that you owe me a favor?"

That did not sound bad at all. Saint was on the verge of reaching the coveted [200/200] status, and was currently just a few shadow fragments away from it. However, Sunny couldn't really agree to the proposal without knowing what exactly she expected him to do.

…Or could he?

Master Jet was one of the two Ascended he knew, and his only contact to the government. This was a relationship worth maintaining, which meant that it wasn't wise to refuse her request for assistance.

Plus, Sunny quite liked her, and also owed her a lot… even before she had saved him during the Gate battle. They were both from the outskirts, and had a rather good rapport.

They had a connection.

He lingered for a moment, and then said:

"Alright, no problem. I'll do it."

Master Jet answered with satisfaction in her voice.

"Good. I'll come pick you up, then."

Sunny glanced around, evaluating how presentable his living room was. He was suddenly a bit nervous.

'What the hell? What are you nervous for, fool?'

He cleared his throat, and then said:

"Sure… oh, wait. Let me give you an address…"

Master Jet laughed.

"Gee, Sunny. I work for the government, remember? I know your address."

Before he could respond, the call was cut off. Sunny was left standing with a rather dumbfounded expression on his face.

'She knows… well, of course she knows. I wonder what else she knows?'

Noticing the strange look on his face, Rain asked:

"Did something bad happen?"

Sunny sighed, then slowly shook his head.

"No, nothing bad. Just some business I have to deal with. Sorry, we'll have to continue the lesson next time."

She stared at him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well, alright. I'll practice back home, then."

With that, Rain picked up her training sword, said goodbye to Effie, and left.

A couple of seconds after the door closed behind her, the former huntress gave him an amused look.

"That pupil of yours is a bit dense, isn't she?"

Sunny frowned, offended by her words.

"What do you mean?"

Effie giggled.

"Well, you've been tutoring her for a whole month, and she still has no idea who the two of us are. We're just two average, random Awakened to her. I mean, it's not surprising that she didn't recognize you. But I am a very famous person, you know!"

Sunny smiled slightly.

"Yeah, yeah. Your pride must be really hurt, venerable Raised by Wolves. Please accept my sincere apologies… not everyone, you see, is obsessed with the Awakened. Rain for example is more interested in historical stuff, about or from before the Spell. Plus, the government mostly uses your Dream Realm appearance to plaster all over the city, so…"

Effie waved a hand.

"I'm joking, you doofus. She's a good kid."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"...That's why it hurts me to see her wasting money on a hack like you..."

At that moment, there was a sound of a PTV stopping nearby, and of light steps approaching their door. Effie's eyes shined.

Turning her wheelchair, she opened the door and yelled:

"Finally!"

…Master Jet stood on the porch in her usual deep blue uniform, with one hand raised to knock on the door. Her jacket, as always, was carelessly unbuttoned, revealing her slim waist and generous figure. Her short raven-black hair was a bit messy, and there was a look of slight surprise in her icy blue eyes.

Effie stared at the older woman for a few moments, disappointment clearly written on her face. Then, she said dejectedly:

"Oh. You're not food delivery."

A polite smile appeared on Master Jet's face.

"Ah. Awakened Athena. It's an honor to meet the famous Raised by Wolves. I am Ascended Jet."

Effie glanced at her, then at Sunny, then back at Master Jet.

Then, she smiled.

"...Good job, doofus. I approve."

Sunny gave her a murderous look, cursed inwardly, and turned to Master Jet:

"Do I need to prepare?"

She shook her head.

"Your usual Memories should do. If everything goes well, you won't even need to use them."

He hesitated, and then asked:

"What if it doesn't go well?"

Master Jet grinned, making Sunny suddenly feel very uneasy for some reason.

"Well… then it'll go badly, won't it? We'll know when we know."

With that, she looked at Effie and said:

"Please excuse us. Time is of the essence, so we will have to leave immediately. It was very nice to meet you, Awakened Athena."

Effie winked at her.

"Sure. It was nice to meet you, too. Bring snacks next time!"

Sunny felt his ears turning red and promised himself to have a word with her when he got back.

...Or better yet, kill her. Yes, that would be much better.

'What next time? There won't be a next time!'

He quickly put on shoes and followed Master Jet outside, then got into the familiar PTV. As soon as the doors closed, she sent the vehicle moving at full speed, the acceleration pressing Sunny into the seat.

The streets of the terrace district flew by in a blur.

Master Jet glanced at him, then said wistfully:

"That's a nice home you have there. Feels strange, right? To own one. I did the same thing after becoming an Awakened, actually. Granted, it took me a bit longer to earn enough. You could have afforded a much better district, though.

You know that, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yeah, I know. But I like it here. It's quiet."

She looked into the window and smiled.

"Can't deny that."

Sunny waited for a few moments, then finally asked:

"Uh… Master Jet? Sorry, but what exactly are we doing?"

She briefly glanced at the control screen of the PTV, sent it into a sharp turn, and answered calmly:

"We are going to hunt down a dangerous beast."

He frowned.

"Beast? What kind of a beast?"

Master Jet remained silent for a few moments. Then, she glanced at him and smiled darkly:

"...The most dangerous beast there is. A human."

Chapter-503: Harsh Reality

Sunny shifted in his seat, a bleak expression appearing on his face.

'A human?'

Why would a Master be hunting down a human? There was police for that.

Unless, of course, that human was an Awakened…

Sunny was aware that special government agents — carriers of the Nightmare Spell themselves — dealt with those Awakened who broke the law, simply because police officers were often helpless against criminals that possessed inhuman strength and wielded bizarre or dangerous Aspect Abilities. It made sense that Master Jet would be involved in that side of government work, too.

But, honestly, he didn't know too much about how these things usually went.

Glancing at her, Sunny asked:

"Is it an Awakened criminal?"

Master Jet spared him a short glance.

"A… criminal? Yes, you might say that."

She remained quiet for a few moments, and then corrected herself.

"No, actually, do not. The man we must find is not a criminal. He is an animal... a rabid one."

Sunny frowned.

"An interesting choice of words."

Master Jet was concentrating on driving the PTV, so she didn't answer immediately. When she did, however, her voice was strangely calm:

"You are not an inexperienced Sleeper anymore, Sunny, so I will be straightforward. You, of all people, should be able to understand. The Nightmares, the Dream Realm… they take a toll. Some people endure, some people break. Some people carry the nightmares back with them to the real world."

A dark expression slowly appeared on her face.

"From what I heard about the Forgotten Shore, you witnessed the worse of what the Spell does to us. Yes, we Awakened are at the top of the world… those who return alive, that is. We have all the privileges, all the money, all the power. But the mark it leaves on us never goes away. After all the pain, blood, and horror… after all the crap we the lucky few are forced to survive, many crack."

Master Jet looked at the road, her icy eyes full of unimaginable coldness.

"...Some crack a little, and some crack a lot. The government portrays us Awakened as powerful and noble, the saviors of the world… but really, most of us are walking on the edge, just one little step away from madness. All that trauma can mess one up really good, you know? It's all a big, big mess. So, when one of the Awakened loses control and makes that last step… what do you think happens?"

Sunny remained silent for a while, thinking about the damage a deranged Awakened could do in the mundane world. His expression became dark and heavy.

He didn't even want to imagine.

"When that happens... you receive a call."

Master Jet glanced at him and smiled.

"Smart. Yes, when an Awakened goes out of control, I — or someone like me — receives the call. Things like that usually don't get out, because the government doesn't want them to. For obvious reasons.

Everything is dealt with quietly, and so, here we are."

Sunny didn't speak for a bit. Then, he asked:

"So, what exactly is going to happen? We find this guy, talk him down or overpower him, and then put him in cuffs? Arrest him?"

What a funny thought that was. Him, making an arrest. Sunny had been on the other side of this equation a few times in the past, and never in his life had he imagined putting handcuffs on someone, and not the other way around.

Master Jet gave him a complicated look. There was almost... pity?

"...No. We are not going to arrest him."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Will he be free to walk around as if nothing happened until the trial?"

Of course, there was another, much darker answer…

As if reading his thoughts, Jet slowly shook her head.

"No. No, he won't be walking around."

Sunny looked into the window.

"...Ah."

Master Jet sighed.

"If they summoned me, then things are already beyond that. Think about it… if a mundane human needs to be contained, you can put them in prison. But we… we are Awakened. Realistically, there is no prison that can be built to hold us. Not with every Aspect being unique, and demanding unique means of containment. So there will be no arrest, and there will be no trial."

She accelerated the PTV even further, and then said evenly:

"...There will only be an execution."

Sunny looked out the window, not sure how he felt about that. Yes, what Master Jet said made sense. Awakened were too powerful, and too dangerous. If one of them lost control, then they needed to be dealt with, somehow. In a perfect world, they would go through the same process that mundane humans went through.

They would be arrested, tried, and either locked in a cell or receive proper help in a mental institution.

But this was not a perfect world.

So, instead, they would just be hunted down and executed, and the whole thing would be swept under the rug to preserve the spotless reputation the Awakened enjoyed.

Although harsh, this was the somber reality. He wasn't against the idea itself. He just didn't know how to feel about the fact that this time, he was going to be the executioner.

Finally turning to Master Jet, Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then asked:

"So why me, of all people? Why ask me for help?"

Master Jet glanced at him, then grinned.

"Three reasons, really."

She blew through an intersection, almost crashing into a heavy cargo vehicle, and then dodged it at the last second.

"First, I know you. There are many people who could have helped, but very few whom I would trust to have my back."

Sunny nodded, strangely pleased to hear that.

"Second, from the initial information I received, the suspect might have an Aspect that is somewhat similar to yours. High affinity to shadows. So, you'll be helpful when we're tracking him down, and if things go south, he won't be able to escape easily."

'Another shadow user... interesting.'

She gave him a calm look, and added:

"And lastly… there are a lot of people working for the government, but very few who are suited for this kind of work. Unlike you and I."

Sunny considered her words. After a while, he asked:

"Because I am from the outskirts, just like you?"

Master Jet remained silent for a bit, and then gave him a bright smile.

"...No. Because you are a killer. Just like me."

Chapter-504: The Right People

Sunny wanted to deny her words, but in the end, simply turned away to look at the city streets flying by.

Master Jet knew, of course.

She had long known that he had the capacity to be a killer because of the cruel past the two of them shared, and more than that, she had access to the records about the events of the Forgotten Shore that the government agents had compiled.

Out there, Sunny had killed his fair share of people. He had not been the most active participant in the civil war for the throne of the Bright Castle, but his hands were covered in blood, too. There were very few survivors of the Dark City who, like Aiko, managed to go through that morbid ordeal without staining themselves with human blood.

And then there were other lives that almost no one knew that he had ended — Caster, Harus, the hunters who had kept Kai locked in the dark well… and Harper.

Even before that, he had killed the old slaver, Shifty, Scholar, and Auro of the Nine without batting an eye.

…Honestly, it was not a big deal. Except for maybe Harper, Sunny never lost sleep over any of the humans that had died by his hand. If he was honest with himself, he had to admit that some of them he even enjoyed killing, a little.

And it was precisely the fact that he didn't think of it as a big deal that proved Master Jet's words. Sunny was a killer, and not in the sense that he had killed before or had been taught how to. He had an innate aptitude for that sort of thing, and there were not a lot of people who did.

In fact, he only knew three. The first one was himself.

The second was Nephis. She was the one who had taught him about murder, after all.

…Maybe that was one of the reasons why Changing Star had chosen to impart her family battle style to Sunny. Maybe she had recognized that the two of them were similar… that both of them had seen and known the truth of this world. That he would be able to understand.

The third one was Master Jet.

Sunny suddenly realized that he didn't know much about her, apart from her Rank, her past as a kid from the outskirts, and her role as a government operative. Everything that he thought he knew about Master Jet had come from what others told him about her, painting an intimidating and imposing picture of the fearsome Soul Reaper.

That picture, however, did not reveal the real human hidden behind the loud nickname. In fact, it only served to obscure her more.

What nightmares had Jet herself survived on her path to becoming a Master? What were her hopes, her convictions? What were her goals?

He had no idea.

Thinking about it, Sunny hesitated for a while, and then said:

"Master Jet? Can I ask you a question?"

She glanced at him briefly and smiled.

"Sure."

Sunny carefully chose his words before formulating a question. In the end, he asked simply:

"...Why are you not a Saint?"

Master Jet laughed, her voice full of amusement.

"What a peculiar question. You say it as though becoming a Saint is

something that just anyone can do."

He shook his head, not willing to let it go.

"But you are not just anyone. Sure, you might be younger than most Masters out there, but very few of them can compare to you in terms of talent and power. The fact that you chose to challenge the Second Nightmare proves that you have ambition. So why stop?"

She spared him another glance and asked with an easy smile:

"Why? What have you heard?"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'Crap...'

"I've been told that no one wants to go into a Nightmare with you because of your… problematic personality. Murderous savage and psychopathic killer — these were the precise words they used. Uh… sorry."

Her smile turned wider.

"Really? Haven't heard those before. Huh… I like it. But what do you yourself think?"

He remained silent for a bit, and then said with a bit of doubt:

"I don't think I buy it. I just took it at face value as an inexperienced Sleeper, but after the Forgotten Shore, that statement doesn't seem to make sense. Sure, it is important to trust those who you enter the Nightmare with… but at the end of the day, strength is strength. And you are very strong.

You also work for the government, which proves your ability to be an adequate part of a larger collective. To work in a team. So, I simply don't understand."

Master Jet did not speak for a while, concentrating on the road. Eventually, she answered, a hint of darkness finding its way into her voice:

"...That is because you don't know enough. You're young, and haven't had to deal with the Awakened affairs a lot. Plus, some of these things people only learn after reaching a certain stage. You're not at that stage yet, but since you asked, I'll answer."

She looked at him, the smile disappearing from her face.

"It is very simple, really. Basically, you need the right people to help you become a Master. But to become a Saint… to become a Saint, you need for the right people to not obstruct you. Take it as you will."

She didn't say anything else, and Sunny did not ask, a deep frown appearing on his face.

'For the right people… to not obstruct you…'

He understood what Master Jet was hinting at, of course. He knew enough to come to the right conclusion.

What she just told him was that to become a Saint, one had to... receive permission.

And it wasn't too hard to realize who had to give that permission.

The Sovereigns.

Who else but them? The three Supremes who ruled the most powerful Awakened — the Legacy clans — from the shadows. Come to think of it, such an arrangement made a lot of sense.

There were just a few dozen Saints in the world, and each of them possessed unbelievable, mind-boggling powers. Would the Sovereigns have allowed for such powerful individuals to exist outside of their control?

From everything that Sunny knew about the vile nature of power and how the world worked, the answer was obvious - no.

So… did every Saint out there actually belong to one of the Sovereigns?

It seemed that they did. Even Sky Tide of the White Feather clan, who gave Sunny an impression of being a reclusive and fiercely independent woman, was beholden to a Great Clan… and, therefore, to Anvil of Valor — Vale of Aster, Song, and Vale — the Sovereign of that clan.

What about people like Master Jet, then? Someone capable enough to become a Saint, but either labeled as undesirable or simply unwilling to submit to one of the Supremes? What was the obstruction she had spoken about?

Was it a simple lack of support, or would the Sovereigns go much further to prevent an independent Saint from appearing in the world?

If they had no problem with sending assassins to kill the six-year-old daughter of their former comrade and companion, then they would surely have none with making someone like Jet meet an unfortunate end, should she act out of line.

He lowered his head and briefly covered his eyes with a hand.

'It's the same… it's absolutely the same crap as what Gunlaug had done in the Bright Castle. Gods, how unoriginal…'

But that was the thing about vile things. People loved to romanticize evil and those who committed it, creating countless alluring characters to act as compelling and brilliant villains. But in reality, human evil was almost always banal. It always followed the same disgusting, predictable paths, and led to the same hateful end.

No wonder Nephis wanted to destroy them so much…

Sunny's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the PTV coming to an abrupt stop. Looking out the window, he saw that they had arrived at a dark and narrow alley, which was currently blocked off by a police cordon. Blinking lights of several armored police vehicles drowned it in an unsettling glow, and there were many officers on the scene, their faces pale and tense.

Master Jet yawned, stretched, and gave him a crooked grin.

"Rise and shine, Awakened Sunless. We've arrived..."

Chapter-505: The Slaughterhouse

Sunny got out of the PTV, somewhat apprehensive of what he was about to see. The police officers present at the scene looked very relieved to see Master Jet and him appear — their tense faces cleared, and the darkness hiding in their eyes seemed to dissipate a little.

This was not at all how these types of situations were usually portrayed in popular media. In the crime mystery shows, whenever a plucky mundane detective encountered a cold and by-the-book Awakened agent, their relationship always started very confrontationally, with mutual disdain and debates over who was supposed to handle the case… only to end as an entertaining team-up, of course.

Once again, reality turned out to be very different from how storytellers liked to portray it. There was no conflict over jurisdiction or negativity expressed by the police officers. Instead, they were genuinely happy to see the Awakened specialists arrive.

…Well, of course they were. It was just as the old policeman had once told, right before Sunny faced the First Nightmare — if he died there and no Awakened was near, they would have to fight the Nightmare Creature his body had turned into themselves. And that was not something mundane humans ever wished to do.

Master Jet walked over to one of the policemen and greeted him with a short nod. Despite the fact that he was much older than her — not to mention Sunny himself — the officer treated them with the utmost respect.

"Nice to see you again, ma'am. Greetings, sir. Let me show you the way."

He led them deeper into the alley, toward a heavy metal door that hid in the deep shadows. It was wide open, and there were strange flashes of intense white light coming out of it, mixing with the red glow of the police sirens. The whole situation seemed a little surreal to Sunny, as though he was in the midst of a strange dream.

'I mean… where else would I be addressed as "sir" by a police officer? Life sure is funny sometimes…'

Slightly amused by this thought, he turned to Master Jet and asked:

"What is this place?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said in an unexpectedly dark tone:

"It's a… club, of sorts. Called the Slaughterhouse. One of the few such establishments in the city."

Sunny stared at the door, which had no sign or any indication that there was a club on the other side of it. Was this a marketing ploy to create a feeling of mystique and exclusivity, or were there things going on inside that needed to be hidden?

"...A peculiar name for a nightclub."

Master Jet smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"It is meant for a very specific clientele. The ground floor is your usual dance club, but beneath it, there is a VIP area with an underground arena. There is nothing illegal going on there, just… things that are in poor taste."

She paused, and then added somberly:

"They send Echoes, usually dormant beasts, to fight against mundane fighters there. The fighters are paid generously, of course, and the club profits from the rich assholes who enjoy watching this sort of thing enough to recoup losses if one of the Echoes is accidentally destroyed. Everyone wins… I guess."

Sunny frowned.

He knew that wealthy people were big fans of wasteful forms of entertainment, and that there were arenas where precious Echoes were made to fight each other just for the spectacle of it. Hiring mundane humans to battle them, though… wasn't it a bit too much?

'Did I suddenly become a child after the Awakening?'

Of course, nothing was ever too much. Sunny knew all about how vice worked, from his childhood in the outskirts. His current surprise was just because he lacked knowledge of what forms it took among the more affluent layers of society.

"So what happened in that Slaughterhouse?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"That's what we have to find out. All I know is that everyone inside is dead. Kind of ironic, actually!"

The police officer guiding them spared her a glance, and then said hoarsely:

"It's a… proper mess there, ma'am. Not for people with weak stomachs. And also not something that a mundane human would have been able to do."

'Charming…'

Inside, the air was filled with the smell of blood. Sunny found himself in a vast hall flooded by flashing lights, blinding white mixing with short moments of absolute darkness to create a strange and invasive atmosphere. It was hard to perceive anything in this strobe light hell.

Master Jet frowned:

"What's with the light show?"

The policeman looked down in embarrassment.

"Sorry, ma'am. We figured out how to turn off the music, but the lights are giving us some trouble."

She gave him an unamused look.

"Well, get on with it."

The officer turned around and walked away, shouting at his colleagues. A few moments later, the hall suddenly became enveloped in darkness, and then the regular illumination kicked in.

Without the constantly flashing strobe lights, the club looked smaller and more worn down than Sunny had expected. He did not pay too much attention to the design of the interior, the raised stage, or the bar with hundreds of expensive-looking bottles standing on the shelves behind it.

With a gloomy expression on his face, Sunny was looking at the bodies.

There were more than a dozen of them, all broken and terribly disfigured, as if chewed and spewed out by a tornado. But of course, a natural disaster had nothing to do with what had happened in the seedy club. The result only looked like it.

This was the work of an Awakened.

Suddenly, he remembered Master Jet's question, seeing it in a new light.

When an Awakened loses control… what do you think happens?

The answer was right in front of him.

Terribly battered human bodies were lying on the floor, drowning in pools of blood. Indeed, this was not a sight for those who had weak stomachs... but, for better or worse, Sunny had seen enough horrors to not be moved too much by such a scene.

It left a deep impression even on him, though.

Sunny didn't have to look too closely to realize what had transpired. The position of the bodies, the nature of their wounds… the murderer had not used some powerful Memory or let an Echo loose on these people. No, it was much simpler.

They just did it with their hands.

Back during the Gate battle, Sunny had thrown a heavy vehicle at the advancing horde of Nightmare Creatures, carving a bloody path in their ranks. That was the strength of an Awakened. Even if he had been augmented by a shadow, his own strength was still vastly superior to that of a mundane human.

A frenzied Awakened could tear through a dozen humans in a matter of seconds, and none of them would be able to do anything to stop it. In front of a Spell carrier, mundane humans were like paper dolls. It only took a little effort to destroy them.

'That bastard…'

Sunny remembered how he had doubted whether or not he wanted to play the role of an executioner on the way to the crime scene.

...Rain could have been one of the victims. He could have been one, too, before becoming an Awakened.

As he was looking at the broken bodies, all his doubts disappeared.

Chapter-506: Silent Witnesses

As Sunny studied the bodies, Master Jet went away to talk to the police officers, and then returned with one of them. There was a disappointed expression on her face.

"No usable recordings left. Figures… places like this one only exist because they value the privacy of their clients. And the few cameras they did have show nothing but darkness."

Sunny looked at her, then sighed:

"Not much to tell from the victims, too. The murderer just used their fists."

She shrugged.

"That's how it usually goes, in situations like this. The most likely scenario is that the murderer was one of the clients, who went on a rampage because of either alcohol or stimulants, and a momentary failure to hold on to their sanity. So I doubt that this mess was premeditated."

Master Jet remained silent for a moment, and then added:

"He was lucid enough to use his Aspect to obscure the cameras, though. So dealing with him won't be too simple."

With that, she turned to the police officer and asked:

"Any survivors? Do we have witnesses?"

He hesitated for a bit, then gave her a strange look.

"That… yes, actually, there are a few. But…"

The officer didn't finish the sentence, and just stared at them with an

uneasy expression.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"But what? Are they refusing to talk?"

The policeman shook his head slowly.

"No, they're not refusing. They just… I don't know, something is wrong with them. They just don't speak, or even react really. I've seen a lot of people in shock, and sometimes, they can seem almost catatonic. But this… this is something else. Gave us all the creeps, to be honest."

Sunny and Master Jet glanced at each other, and then, one of them said:

"Lead the way."

The officer sighed, then escorted them to the back of the club, where an inconspicuous door led to the service rooms. The witnesses were gathered in a small office, standing there motionlessly, with nervous paramedics trying to determine the reason for their condition.

There were five of them, all sharing the same blank, strangely peaceful expression on their faces. They were completely silent, motionless, and still. They did not react to the arrival of new people at all.

Their eyes were calm and empty.

Sunny paled.

'How… how is this possible?'

It only took him a second to recognize what was wrong with the survivors, of course.

In fact, they weren't survivors at all. These people were dead.

To be more precise, they were Hollow.

'How can a mundane human be Hollow?'

Suddenly, he felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Looking at Master Jet, he saw that she had a deep frown on her face, too.

The massacre in the dance hall was bad enough. But this, this just made the whole situation frightening and eerie. If before Sunny was just disgusted, now, he was starting to get concerned.

"What the hell?"

Master Jet stared at the five Hollows for a few moments, then turned to the paramedics.

"Go take a break, guys. Let these people be. They are already dead."

One of the paramedics — a mature woman with short blond hair and gentle eyes — looked at her with confusion.

"I'm sorry, ma'am? But… but they're fine. We need to…"

Jet let out a heavy sigh.

"Their souls are destroyed. There is nothing you can do to help them. Something else will take care of the rest."

The paramedic looked at her for a while, then glanced at the ground and silently walked away. Her colleagues followed, expressions of regret, anger, and horror clearly written on their faces.

The police officer stayed, but made a point of standing as far away from the Hollows as he could.

Master Jet stood silently for a few moments, her scowls growing deeper, then turned to Sunny.

"Answering your question, I don't know."

He hesitated for a bit, then asked:

"But how can a mundane human become a Hollow? It's only supposed

to happen to those who die in the Dream Realm, right?"

She glanced at him, then silently shook her head. Eventually, Master Jet said:

"...Wrong. There is a very small chance of a powerful soul attack creating a Hollow. But beings capable of dealing direct soul damage are very rare, so it doesn't happen too often. Almost never, really."

Sunny walked closer to the five empty humans and studied them.

"Can you do something like this?"

Master Jet lingered for a bit, then answered simply:

"If I am really precise."

Something was very wrong with these people. And not just the fact that they were Hollow. There was something else… something that almost made Sunny's hair stand on end.

A feeling of subtle, but profound wrongness.

He reached out with Shadow Sense, and flinched.

Master Jet did not miss that sudden reaction.

"What? Did you discover something?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, then nodded.

"Their shadows… they're dead."

She stared at him with a raised eyebrow:

"How does this work? I don't know much about shadow affinity, sorry… it's a very rare type of Aspect. Does damage to a shadow correlate to soul damage?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then shrugged.

"I am not so sure myself. There's no manual for it, after all. But… only two things ever managed to damage my shadow. One was

another shadow, and the other was a soul attack."

Sunny wasn't sure that he was comfortable providing Master Jet — a person specializing in exactly such a type of attack — with this information, but decided to share it nevertheless.

He trusted her that much, at least.

"So… since shadows are susceptible to soul damage, it is not too much of a leap to assume that they share a deep connection to the soul, or are tied to it somehow, at least."

She nodded, and remained silent for a while, thinking. Then, Master Jet echoed his recent question:

"Can you do something like this?"

Sunny shook his head.

"No. My Aspect doesn't have means of dealing damage to someone's shadow. At least not yet."

His Shadow Sense, meanwhile, spread throughout the whole club, allowing him to perceive it as a whole.

And there, deeper underground, he noticed something strange.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then turned to the police officer.

"Gather your colleagues and leave. Don't come inside again until either Master Jet or I tell you to."

The policeman opened his mouth, wishing to say something, then simply nodded and hurriedly walked away.

Master Jet glanced at Sunny with a question in her eyes.

"...What was that all about?"

Sunny gave her a dark look.

"That's... how do I say this? I think the killer is still inside."

Chapter-507: In the Spotlight

Master Jet remained silent for a second, then asked calmly:

"Are you sure? This place has been swept multiple times before we arrived."

Sunny nodded.

"He is here. Underground."

She looked down, her face slowly turning somber.

"...Well, I guess we should go and say hi."

Sunny nodded and made a step toward the door of the small office. However, she suddenly stopped him.

"Wait."

He looked at her with a bit of confusion.

"Yes?"

Master Jet hesitated for a few moments. There was a complicated expression on her face. Finally, she said:

"There are very few people with a shadow affinity Aspect in the world, and even fewer who frequent places such as this."

Sunny frowned.

"What are you trying to say?"

She looked at him darkly.

"I'm saying that I might know this guy. In fact, when I heard that

there was an incident in the Slaughterhouse, I already had a suspicion of who was responsible."

He blinked a couple of times.

"You know the murderer?"

Master Jet shrugged.

"There are hundreds of thousands of Awakened in the world. That seems like a big number, but in fact, it is not. If you live long enough, sooner or later, you will know of everyone who is worth knowing… more or less. It's a small world."

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"Point is, if I am right, then this will be dangerous. This guy is not someone who has spent his whole life behind a Citadel wall. He is… was the real deal. A specialist."

Sunny glanced at the five Hollows, then frowned slightly.

'A specialist… what a peculiar word.'

But he understood what Master Jet had meant. Most of the Awakened were thrust into the Spell and tried desperately to survive, striving to return to a semblance of a normal life. A much smaller amount, for whatever reason, embraced their new nightmarish reality and adapted to it… even thrived in it.

They shaped their lives to suit the deadly challenge of the Nightmare Spell, and not the other way around.

Sunny was one of these specialists himself, after all.

"If he is such a specialist, then how did this mess happen?"

Master Jet shook her head.

"Who do you think are the most compromised Awakened? Folks who spent as little time as possible in the Dream Realm and then return to their actual lives? No, it's people like us, the professionals."

He thought on it for a bit, then said with confusion:

"I don't get it… even if he is a seasoned fighter, so what? You are an Ascended. Surely, dealing with him will be easy."

Master Jet shook her head.

"Nothing is ever easy, Sunny. That is a mindset that will get you killed. No matter how powerful you are, one mistake is all it takes. Raw power doesn't always decide the outcome of the fight. You should know this already… every Aspect has a Flaw, and every power has a counter. So keep your guard up."

Sunny had to agree that she was right. His own experience served as the perfect proof. Harus had died by his hand because Sunny's Aspect was a perfect counter to his formidable Ability, and Caster had been undone by his Flaw.

He remained silent for a few moments, and then said:

"When we confront this guy, pay attention to your shadow. Don't let him get anywhere near it."

Master Jet frowned, and then gave him a simple nod.

Together, they returned to the dance hall, and then found another heavy metal door. Behind it, a narrow staircase led further down, to the underground arena.

The arena itself was larger than Sunny had imagined, and looked more like a luxurious theater than a fighting pit. The rows of seats were furnished with red velvet, and there were private boxes for the most affluent of the visitors. The arena itself resembled a stage and was surrounded by a protective barrier fashioned out of transparent alloy.

The whole space was sparsely illuminated, with deep shadows nesting between the areas of light. Still, one could more or less see everything.

Master Jet studied the interior of the arena, then said quietly:

"There's no one here."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then walked over to a control panel hidden in one of the boxes and moved several switches.

A moment later, bright spotlights ignited on the ceiling, flooding the arena with a bright radiance. The wave of light chased away the shadows, and suddenly, a figure of a man could be seen in the very center of the stage, sitting on the floor with his face buried in his hands. Previously, that place had seemed to be utterly empty.

The man grimaced, and then raised his head to stare at the lights with a dark expression. A hoarse voice resounded in the silence of the underground theater:

"Bastards… why can't they just leave me alone…"

The murderer was around thirty, with a gaunt unshaven face and bloodshot eyes. There were several used stimulant packs lying on the floor around him, as well as shards of a broken liquor bottle.

His clothes, hands, and face were covered with blood, but the man didn't seem to mind.

Blocking the light with one hand, he lowered his gaze and slowly focused it on Master Jet and Sunny.

A hint of recognition slowly appeared in his eyes, which was then replaced with contempt.

"...Is that you, Soul Reaper? Hell… they sent the attack dog herself after me? Ha! What an honor…"

Sunny sighed inwardly.

What was it with people and calling others dogs? He really didn't get it. Dogs were marvelous creatures, from what he knew. Of course, only the rich could afford to have one. Dogs were the rich man's best friend…

Jet took a step forward, piercing the man with a cold, cold gaze. The murderer shivered.

"Hi there, Kurt. Long time no see."

After hearing her voice, the man called Kurt suddenly grinned.

"Yeah... long time indeed. You got really full of yourself lately, haven't you, Jet? Funny that a government lapdog like you finds it beneath herself to associate with upstanding people like me. Back in the day, you at least knew how to show respect, bitch."

Ignoring his insult, she smiled, too.

"...Do you even understand what you have done, Kurt?"

The grin disappeared from his face. As Sunny and Jet slowly walked toward the arena, he furtively looked away.

"What, that mess upstairs? Ah… shit, who cares? They were just cattle, anyway. Mundanes only exist to produce more of us, right? So what's the big deal..."

Sunny's eye twitched.

'He's a proper bastard, isn't he?'

Master Jet, meanwhile, stopped smiling.

"...I care, Kurt. I care."

He suddenly laughed.

"Wait… wait, you're being serious? You're really going to do the whole thing? I'm getting the full parade? Fuck, that's hilarious!"

Suddenly, an ugly expression appeared on his face.

"Have you forgotten who you are, Jet? Gods, did becoming a Master give you that big of a head? Come on… we all know who you work for, and who I work for. You'll still be a Master when I am a Saint, wench."

He glanced at Sunny, and then added in a mocking tone:

"Look, you even had to bring a kid to help you out. I guess no adult is

willing to get your stench on them."

Then, Kurt got a bit serious and stared at Jet darkly, deep shadows slowly gathering around him.

"Look… I get it. I fucked up. So let's have it. Give me a slap on the hand, and be on your merry way, alright? I'm having a really hard day as it is... we all know that you won't dare to do more, anyway."

Master Jet tilted her head a little, and then said with amusement:

"Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Kurt. I do dare. Yeah, we both know who I work for, and who your sorry ass works for. But, the thing is… I don't give a damn."

She chuckled and outstretched one hand, as if ready to summon her weapon.

Kurt laughed again. This time, however, his laugh was a bit desperate.

Then, he looked down and whispered:

"Ah, well. Not like it matters, anyway. You know about the Obel scale, so why even bother? Nothing will change…"

He remained still for a moment, and then suddenly exploded with movement.

…After that, everything happened very fast.

Chapter-508: Battle of the Shadows

Kurt moved with terrible speed, covering the distance between the center of the arena and the first row of the seats, where Sunny and Master Jet were, in a split second.

Just from the way he moved, it was easy to tell that his soul core had been fully saturated a long time ago. He was indeed a powerful Awakened.

…Still, it wasn't enough time to summon a Memory.

The white sparks that were supposed to form into a glaive were just starting to manifest themselves around Jet's hand, but he was already upon her. One of Kurt's hands shot forward, a knife forged out of a strange lusterless alloy appearing in it as if out of nowhere.

There was no magic involved in its sudden appearance, though. The knife had just been hidden in a secret sheath on his forearm.

Of course, Master Jet was much faster. She blocked the strike before it could ever reach her flesh… at the last moment, however, Kurt twisted his wrist and let go of the handle, sending the knife flying past her.

…Right at Sunny.

He had barely any time to react.

The Cruel Sight was still in the process of being summoned, so Sunny used his other hand to try and swat the knife away. It jerked up, but then froze.

'No, wrong!'

A fraction of a second too late, Sunny realized that the knife was not aimed at his body.

It was aimed at his shadow.

And since he had wasted precious time being mistaken about the killer's intentions, it was too late to move his body away to make the shadow shift out of harm's way.

Luckily, Sunny's shadow could move on its own.

It suddenly went out of the sync with his movements and jumped away, letting the knife bury itself in the floor and send a net of cracks through the sturdy synthwood boards.

Shaken, Sunny belatedly jumped back.

'What is this…'

Any other Awakened would have been killed by that devious attack, most likely. To Kurt's misfortune, though, he had met a fighter well-versed in all things shadow.

A few steps away, Master Jet was already turning her block into an attack. Her fist seemed to teleport forward, tearing through the air so fast that it sent a small shockwave rolling through the underground arena.

Kurt had long disengaged, though. As soon as he threw the knife, he saturated his body with essence and lunged back, smashing through the velvet seats and momentarily appearing a dozen meters away. As soon as his feet touched the ground, he was already moving again, dashing sideways.

At the same time, three more knives flew at terrible speed toward Master Jet and Sunny. Their purpose was not to kill or wound them, but just to slow them down.

One was meant for the Ascended, one for Sunny, and the last one for his shadow.

Sunny dodged the knife and summoned the shadow to wrap itself

around his body, feeling his strength and speed become even more enhanced. He dashed forward, and finally felt the cool wooden surface of the Cruel Sight's hilt appear in his hand.

'Not… not too bad…'

Jet's voice tore this thought to shreds:

"Be careful! He's planning somethi…"

Before she could finish the thought, a dark smile appeared on Kurt's face.

In the next moment, something massive broke through the floorboards and struck her… or at least tried to.

Soul Reaper easily sidestepped the attack and jumped back, then suddenly twisted, making her shadow grow smaller. A fourth knife appeared out of nowhere and pierced the floor where it had been just a moment ago.

Kurt clicked his tongue.

"...So annoying."

Sunny, meanwhile, was staring at the thing that crawled from under the floor.

It looked like a mound of worn rags , with two long arms that had one too many joints growing out of it, each ending in three terrifying curved claws. The towering thing was vaguely humanoid in shape, with broad shoulders and a small head covered by a tattered hood.

He felt angry at his own stupidity.

'An Echo… curses, of course he has an Echo!'

Why else would the bastard frequent the Slaughterhouse and its underground arena?

Something didn't add up, though… whatever that thing was, it didn't look like any kind of a dormant beast Sunny had ever seen. If he had

to guess, he would be willing to bet that the creature was at least of the Fallen Rank, and had at least three soul cores hiding in its raggedy carcass. Maybe more…

Weren't the arena meant for dormant Echoes?

As a vicious-looking curved sword appeared in Kurt's hands, Sunny got his answer.

Three more Nightmare Creatures suddenly appeared out of the shadows. These seemed not to be Fallen, at least. He wasn't sure if they were beasts or monsters, though… just that they looked rather menacing.

One was covered in black chitin and had a long tail that ended in a jagged blade, drops of poison falling from it and leaving smoldering holes on the floor; the other was like a repulsive mix of a human and a pale centipede, its limbs numerous and thin as bone needles; the last one resembled a marionette with sharp knives sewn to its wrists.

The four Echoes surrounded Master Jet. If it was anybody else, Sunny might have been worried… Soul Reaper, though, seemed unperturbed. She simply raised her glaive and smiled darkly. The air in the underground arena suddenly felt bitterly cold.

She was probably capable of handling the Echoes without too much trouble, even if one of them was a Fallen Demon or worse.

Would she be able to do so while also paying attention to her shadow, though? That was not something people intuitively knew how to do…

As the Nightmare Creatures attacked, Kurt surrounded himself with dancing shadows and dashed forward… while Sunny simply took a step back, and suddenly appeared in his way.

The more shadows the bastard used, the easier it was for Sunny to get to him, after all.

He noticed a hint of surprise in the killer's eyes, and brought the Cruel Sight down.

The somber Memory was in the form of a short sword right now, so the almost non-existent distance between the two of them was not an issue.

Somehow, Kurt managed to dodge the silver blade and swiped at Sunny with his curved sword. Although he was incredibly fast, Sunny was much, much faster. He moved the Cruel Sight and blocked the strike without too much effort.

'Easy…'

Simultaneously, Master Jet's words echoed in his mind…

One mistake is all it takes.

Yeah… Sunny knew it all too well. Usually, he was the beneficiary of this deadly truth, and exploited the mistakes of his enemies to bring them down.

This time, however, the situation was reversed.

As something broke with a deafening crash and a roar full of agony resounded behind their backs, a triumphant spark appeared in Kurt's eyes. At the same time, his shadow suddenly moved. Even though the curved sword was already blocked, its black reflection held in the shadows hand continued to swiftly approach Sunny's flesh.

Before it could cut him down, though, the blade of the Cruel Sight suddenly ignited with blinding radiance, summoning pure sunlight into the underground arena.

Sunny had activated the [Light Eater] enchantment, which could absorb and expel light.

Because it shined much brighter than the lamps illuminating the theater, Kurt's shadow was suddenly thrown away, appearing behind him and far away from Sunny.

An expression of shock twisted the killer's gaunt face, and he swiftly jumped back, creating distance between himself and the radiant shortsword, which was already flying toward his heart.

The hilt of the Cruel Sight, however, suddenly elongated, turning into the shaft of a spear.

Before Kurt could do anything, the silver blade pierced his armor and buried itself deep in his chest.

He opened his mouth, eyes full of disbelief. Before any words could escape it, though, the spearhead turned furiously incandescent, and suddenly, the killer's body became enveloped with white flames.

In mere seconds, he had turned into ash.

Sunny sighed.

[...You have slain an Awakened human, Kurt.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'What a pity… I hoped to receive more than a single fragment from a fellow shadow user.'

The Spell wasn't done talking, though.

[You have received an Echo.]

Chapter-509: Ghastly Reward

In the deadly silence that settled over the underground arena after the Spell had spoken its last sentence, Sunny stared motionlessly at the flakes of ash swirling in the air.

'...An Echo?'

He was now in possession of a new Echo.

A human Echo.

Of course, it was only logical that an Awakened could leave one behind. Sunny had received his first-ever Memory after killing a human, after all, and those were not too different. However, somehow, he had never considered commanding an Echo left behind by a dead man. One that he had killed with his own two hands, no less.

Wasn't it a little bit too ghastly?

He imagined the soulless, empty copy of Kurt staring at him with lifeless eyes, and shivered a little.

The situation was only made more morbid by the fact that a softly glowing soul shard was left in the pile of ash that the killer had turned into. Just like with Nightmare Creatures, the strange nature of Sunny's Aspect left the crystal intact despite absorbing the shadow fragment. If an ordinary Awakened was in his place, the shard would have formed empty and cracked.

Sunny had never dug into the corpses of his human victims to retrieve one, so this was his first time seeing a soul shard left behind by one of his own kind.

…Before Master Jet could see it, too, Sunny bent down, picked up the

luminescent crystal, and hid it in his sleeve. His face twitched slightly.

Just as he did, an amused voice resounded from behind him:

"Well, I'll be damned… that was fast."

He hesitated for a moment, and then turned around.

Master Jet was surrounded by a scene of devastation, the interior of the underground theater in her vicinity completely destroyed. She was casually leaning on her glaive, and there was an amused expression on her face. Kurt's Echoes, of course, had disappeared after his death… however, Sunny didn't know how many of them she had killed before that happened.

In any case, there were no wounds on her body.

Master Jet whistled.

"You actually put down the bastard all by yourself. That's, uh… nicely done, Sunny."

From her voice, it was clear that she was pleasantly surprised. And why wouldn't she be? Kurt was… had been an Awakened with at least ten years of experience under his belt, with a fully saturated soul core and an insidious, deadly Aspect. While Sunny… Sunny had become an Awakened less than a year ago. He was never formally trained, and had no clan or organization supporting his growth.

Not bad for a kid from the outskirts.

He shrugged.

"He was overly reliant on the unique nature of his powers. A little knowledge of the shadows was all it took, really."

She slowly shook her head.

"Maybe you're right. Still, Kurt had quite a reputation back in the day. But hey, why am I surprised? They gave you the SS designation for a reason."

With that, Master Jet sighed and looked at the pile of ash with a complicated expression.

After a few moments of silence, she added:

"...You know, he was a promising young Awakened too, once. One of the few who didn't treat me like a walking corpse back in the Academy."

Sunny glanced at the ashes, trying to imagine Kurt as young and promising. It wasn't too hard… however, thinking about a person he had killed this way made him uncomfortable.

It was better to remember him as he had been at the end — a depraved, demented murderer. More of a rabid beast, really, than an actual human.

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"So then what happened to him?"

Master Jet lingered for a bit, and then shrugged.

"Life, I guess. Not everyone is cut out for the kind of life we live. In fact, very few are."

Sunny dismissed the Cruel Sight, thought for a few moments, and then asked the question he really wanted to ask:

"So, uh… that stuff he told about having a powerful protector. What was that all about? Are you going to be in trouble? Wait… am I?"

Jet smiled.

"What, did you believe that fool? Don't worry, he was just being delusional. Sure, he had rather powerful masters. But these people… they're not going to make a fuss about someone like him. Kurt became of no use to them the moment he lost control. What's more, he turned into a liability.

So, if anything, we did them a favor by taking care of the mess ourselves."

Her smile suddenly grew wider… but also darker.

"And if they decide otherwise… I'm not so easy to deal with, Sunny. And they would have to go through me first to get to you."

He frowned a little, then nodded, accepting her reasoning. It all made sense, after all. Powerful people were also a practical sort. They wouldn't hesitate to discard a broken tool, and that was what people like Kurt were… tools to be used and discarded once they couldn't be used anymore.

'Good thing I didn't join a Legacy clan. I guess that is what I would have become if I did. Master Jet warned me against it for a reason...'

Then, something else came to his mind.

The strange words Kurt had said right before launching his suicidal attack…

"Not like it matters, anyway. You know about the Obel scale, so why even bother? Nothing will change…"

What did he mean? It almost seemed as though the knowledge of this mysterious Obel scale was the real reason for why he allowed himself to lose control. Of why he had lost… hope?

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"Oh, by the way. What was that nonsense Kurt went on about? The… Obel scale? What is that?"

Master Jet gave him a long, somewhat strange look. Then, she simply shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. It's not some secret, anyway. You can find the information on the network… Obel was the name of a scientist who developed the spelltech system the government uses to detect signs of a manifesting Gate. The infrastructure of that thing is getting old, though, so the readings have become less reliable lately. Nothing that some thorough calibrations can't fix."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Why was he so fixated on it, though?"

She looked at him with amusement.

"How would I know what went on in that crazy head of his? The bastard massacred twenty people, and thought that I would let him go after a stern reprimand. He was obviously not all there at the end…"

He frowned, and decided to let it go. Either Jet knew, or she didn't. Either way, it didn't seem like she was going to tell him.

Instead, Sunny asked:

"Uh, so… what now?"

Master Jet dismissed her glaive and massaged her shoulders.

"Now? Nothing much… give me twenty minutes to settle things down with the police, and then we'll go get you your reward."

She looked at him and added with a smile:

"...By the way, thanks. This would have been much messier without your help."

With that, Master Jet walked toward the exit from the arena, leaving Sunny alone.

He stood silently for a while, and then sighed heavily.

It was time to see about his new Echo… and decide whether he was going to keep the ghastly thing or not.

Chapter-510: Human Echo

Sunny looked around the destroyed theater, then found an intact seat and sat down. Relaxing on the soft velvet cushions, he crossed his legs and looked at the broken stage with a complicated expression.

The shards of glass and empty stimulant packs attracted his attention for a moment. Sunny had expected the stimulants to be of the pleasure-inducing variety, but to his surprise, they were more or less the same as the ones he had used to stay awake for an entire week after returning from the Forgotten Shore.

A slight frown appeared on his.

'Don't tell me… was this guy afraid of going to the Dream Realm?'

…Kurt might have been even more broken than he had suspected. From how Master Jet had described her former acquaintance, the man had once been a dedicated combatant, a specialist... but what kind of a specialist was scared of his specialty?

With a sigh, Sunny stared into the distance and summoned the runes.

And there it was, written in the ancient symbols in the air in front of him:

Echo: [Shadow Blade Kurt].

Echo Type: Beast.

…All humans were considered to be Beasts by the Spell, since they only had one soul core, so this was not surprising.

Well, all humans except for Sunny and Nephis.

As the thought of becoming a Demon drifted into his mind, Sunny read further.

Echo Rank: Awakened.

Echo Attributes: [Swift Hand], [Shadow Sworn], [Mark of Death].

[Swift Hand] Attribute Description: "Your blade strikes fast and true."

[Shadow Sworn] Attribute Description: "You are known to shadows."

[Mark of Death] Attribute Description: "You bear a mark of Death, as just like Death, you were created to be a weapon."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

So, an Attribute that increased perception and agility, an Attribute that gifted Kurt affinity to shadows — although to a much lesser extent than his own — and a third Attribute that… actually, Sunny had no idea what the third Attribute did.

Its description, though, was very interesting. He knew that death had been created by Shadow God, and now, he learned that it had been created as a weapon… but against whom? What kind of enemy could have demanded the creation of such a terrible thing?

Someone immortal, perhaps… no, that didn't make sense. If there had been a time before death was invented, then everything back then was immortal, eternal, and endless… right?

Sunny wasn't sure that he understood the concept of a world without death. What he did know, though, was that something as harrowing as death would not have been invented without a reason.

He frowned, then turned his attention back to the runes:

Echo Abilities: [Shadow Manipulation], [Shadow Strike], [Awakened].

[Shadow Manipulation] Ability Description: "You can affect the movement of shadows and walk through them unseen."

[Shadow Strike] Ability Description: "You can strike at the shadows, and your shadow can strike at the living things."

'...As expected.'

Sunny had more or less surmised what Kurt's Aspect Abilities had been. They were different, but at the same time similar to his own. Both were much less versatile and powerful than what he was capable of himself, though, even if the ability to deal direct damage to and through his shadows was something Sunny would have loved to have access to.

[Shadow Manipulation], especially, was almost no more than a slightly different version of his passive Attribute, [Child of Shadows].

…Still, having a Shadow like Kurt could add a new layer to his battle prowess.

There was also the last Ability:

[Awakened] Ability Description: "This Echo has the innate abilities of a carrier of the Spell."

So... using Memories? That was a nice ability to have. Even Saint herself was limited to only using weapons and charms.

Full of thought, Sunny looked at the last string of runes.

Echo Description: [I have entrusted you with a beautiful blade, but all you created was a hideous nightmare.]

He blinked a couple of times.

'...What's up with that description? Oh my, am I imagining things, or does the Spell sound… bitter?'

What a funny thought that was.

Sunny reclined in the chair and waited for a bit, then grimaced and dove into the Soul Sea.

'Let's take a look…'

He walked past the rows of silent shadows, noticing the dark figure of Shadow Blade Kurt standing among them motionlessly. Sparing him a

glance, Sunny approached the spot between the black suns of his Shadow Cores, found a large sphere of light that orbited one of them, and summoned the Echo down.

The sphere floated to the surface of still waters and slowly dimmed, revealing a gaunt, naked man standing inside.

Sunny felt his skin crawling.

In front of him was a human… or rather, a soulless copy of a human. Echo Kurt looked almost like a person, but the lifeless emptiness in his eyes screamed of a profound, abhorrent wrongness. It was incredibly unnerving.

The Echo was very much like the Hollow victims of its original, only even more vacant and devoid of the undefinable spark that all living things possessed. It was an artificial copy of a man that lacked the very thing that made him human.

A ghastly effigy.

…The thing was incredibly creepy.

Sunny hesitated, then tried to think about things logically.

The Echo was more or less useless to him in its current state, but thanks to its [Awakened] Ability, it would possess the innate capacity to use Memories… which meant that Sunny could provide Echo Kurt with an armor and a weapon.

That question was… did he want to?

On the surface, that question was rather simple. Who wouldn't want to have a creature equal to a powerful Awakened in their service? But really, things were more complicated.

Sunny frowned, then raised a hand and poked the ghastly creature in the shoulder.

A new string of runes appeared near it:

[Transform Echo into a Shadow?]

He froze, thinking.

Having a human Shadow certainly had its benefits. But having any Shadow also demanded a tremendous investment of resources. Nurturing Saint was very hard on Sunny, and especially on his pocket. Less importantly, but still somewhat pressing, was the need to spend a hundred shadow fragments to complete the transformation.

Sunny had spent so much time and effort to get close to creating a third core, and the idea of being suddenly pushed back by a whole hundred fragments did not seem too alluring.

The point was, he felt reluctant to turn just any Echo into a Shadow.

So was Kurt a worthy Echo?

Even though Sunny was very curious to see what would happen if one of the silent shadows was placed into a human Echo, the answer was… no.

Sunny wasn't sure that he was.

There were two reasons.

The first one was rather simple, but also not too convincing.

Master Jet had said that all of them, seasoned Awakened, were walking one step away from the madness. Sunny felt like dragging around a reanimated copy of a man he killed would bring him closer to making that step. His humanity — and sanity, to be honest — were already on thin ice.

However, that wasn't the main reason.

The second reason, and the most important one, was the nature of the Shadows. Shadows weren't soulless, empty copies of their originals. They possessed a semblance of a consciousness, and a distinct personality… Saint was living proof.

Yes, she was created from a powerful Nightmare Creature, but her Attributes and Abilities were not what made her strong. Saint was strong because she was Saint. Her will, intellect, and unbreakable

resolve were what made her such a deadly presence on the battlefield, and a valued companion for Sunny.

And that was why he didn't want to create a Shadow of Kurt. Yes, Kurt possessed powerful Abilities that shared the affinity with Sunny's Aspect.

But Kurt himself… was weak.

His weakness was the cause of why he had drowned himself in alcohol and distasteful hobbies, and why he had eventually surrendered to the burden of the Nightmare Spell and massacred defenseless humans in a fit of demented frenzy.

No matter how powerful, Sunny didn't want to possess a Shadow of an unstable butcher… but more than anything, he didn't want to possess a Shadow of someone who was weak. How could he rely on someone like that?

On the path he was taking, there was no place for weakness… at least not for the weakness of that kind.

With a sigh, he summoned Saint, and watched her appear near the naked figure of Kurt in a whirlpool of black flames.

The taciturn demon stared at him with her indifferent ruby eyes, not paying any attention to the human Echo. Seeing them side by side only made Sunny more sure of his decision.

He remained silent for a few moments, and then gestured at Kurt:

"Do you, maybe... want to eat him?"

Saint remained motionless for a few moments, then silently turned to the Echo and raised one hand. Her gauntlet easily pierced the chest of the dead killer, and a few moments later, his body disintegrated into a flood of white sparks.

Those sparks formed into three brilliant streams and entered into the darkness that hid inside the Shadow, then flowed into her three core remnants.

[Your Echo has been destroyed.]

Sunny felt a wave of bitterness wash over his heart, but very soon, it disappeared.

He was watching the shadow fragment counter in the runes describing Saint.

…Apparently, feeding on Echoes was much more nourishing for a Shadow. She received much more fragments than she would have from an Awakened Memory of the first tier.

Right now, the counter was showing a simple number:

Shadow Fragments: [200/200].

A triumphant smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

Chapter-511: Ascension

'...Finally.'

How long had it been since he created Saint and saw the dreadful [0/200] written in her runes? A year, no less. That was how long it had taken Sunny to gather enough Memories to saturate the dark embers that burned in the black depths of his Shadow.

…What was going to happen now?

The last time Saint had evolved, her transformation took a very long time. Was she going to retreat into the chrysalis of his Shadow Core again? Or was reaching two hundred fragments completely different from what had happened to her after the killing of the Black Knight?

A few moments later, Sunny received the answer.

Bathed in the lightlessness of his Soul Sea, Saint suddenly shuddered. The darkness hiding in her body surged, and the three embers hidden within it — one in her chest, one in her abdomen, and the last one in her head — shined with black radiance.

It was very different, but also very similar to the process he himself had gone through twice, once after the First Nightmare, and once after going through the gateway in the Crimson Spire.

'Is she… is she ascending to a new Rank?'

The thought filled Sunny with a jubilant thrill.

Meanwhile, Saint was in the throes of her transformation. The still waters around her were now restless, as though assaulted by invisible winds. Wisps of dancing black flame suddenly appeared around her body, and it rose above the surface of the water, becoming partially obscured.

Sunny took a step back and silently watched the strange and beautiful process, his heart beating wildly.

After a few minutes, it was over.

The invisible winds disappeared, and so did the black flames. The water turned tranquil and still once again. Saint landed on her feet and straightened, her graceful figure brimming with new power. The glow of her ruby eyes seemed to have become brighter.

Unlike the previous time, the taciturn demon had not changed outwardly. Her onyx armor was still composed of polished, stonelike metal. Sunny knew that beneath it, her skin was still smooth and white as alabaster.

…On the inside, though, the changes were nothing short of profound.

The darkness hiding in the body of the living statue now seemed much, much deeper, and the three embers seemed to have become substantially larger. More than that, they appeared to be… more complete, somehow. Not yet whole, but also not as broken and fragmented as they had been before.

Sunny hesitated, then summoned the runes.

Shadow: [Marble Saint.]

…Her name didn't change. The next string of runes, however, was vastly different:

Shadow Rank: Ascended.

He froze.

'I'll… I'll be damned!'

Ascended, Saint was now Ascended! Indeed, she had achieved a new rank… the same Rank, in fact, as that of Master Jet, as well as the Black Knight, Mirror Beast, and Mordant Mimic.

An Ascended human was called a Master, while Nightmare Creatures of the same Rank were called Fallen. Saint was now somewhere in

between — a creature possessing multiple cores, but following the path of ascension as opposed to the path of corruption.

Like Sunny himself.

Of course, she was much more powerful than him now.

Sunny was torn between being mad with joy and slightly bitter. Back when he had created Saint, she was stronger than him for a long, long time. After becoming an Awakened, he had finally caught up to her… but now, she was the stronger one once more.

He sighed, then looked at his demon with a wide smile.

"Good job, Saint! Who's going to stop us now, huh?"

The taciturn demon did not answer, and just tilted her head a little.

…Then, however, she silently raised her hand, made a fist, and lightly struck the left side of her breastplate twice.

Sunny stared, not accustomed to his Shadow being so chatty.

"...Uh, yeah. Exactly."

Feeling a little awkward, he lingered for a moment, and then looked back to the runes.

Saint's Class, Attributes, and Abilities did not change. At the very end of the plane of runes, however, he was met with an unexpected surprise.

'What?!'

The last string of runes read:

[Shadow Fragments: 44/200].

He stared at the number for a few moments, then rubbed his eyes. No, he wasn't mistaken. It was indeed fourty-four out of two hundred.

Pleasantly confused, Sunny narrowed his eyes.

'But how does it make sense?'

Before Saint had consumed Kurt, the runes showed [188/200]. How many fragments exactly had eating the Echo given her?

With a sudden suspicion, Sunny turned around and looked at the rows of silent shadows.

…The shadow of Kurt was gone.

'So, she consumed it too…'

He was starting to understand what had happened. Most likely, a larger share of the fragments came not from the Echo, but from the shadow of its original. Kurt had been an experienced Awakened, one in possession of a fully saturated core.

By absorbing his shadow, Saint must have inherited a portion of all the soul fragments he had accumulated over his life — just like a human would after slaying another human.

That amount was enough to bridge the gap to the next Rank, and then some. Of course, since his Shadow was now an Ascended, she required shadow fragments of similar quality to grow one-to-one. Those that came from Kurt were only Awakened, though.

So, in fact, the current number would have been [88/200] if Saint's Rank had not changed.

That meant that she received almost a hundred shadow fragments by consuming the Echo of Shadow Blade Kurt… an utterly insane number, considering that it had taken Sunny somewhere around half a year to feed her that much before.

Suddenly, the regret he felt over sacrificing such a valuable Echo disappeared.

'That's a windfall… a crazy windfall!'

Today, luck was truly on his side.

…And an Ascended Demon was now by his side, which instantly

propelled Sunny to a completely new level of capability. Together with the newly transformed Saint, he would be able to do much more, challenge much more powerful Nightmare Creatures, and therefore, accelerate his own growth even further.

Even better, this change could not have come at a better time.

Because it was nearly time for him to return to the Shipwreck Island, and challenge the terrifying being that dwelled in the ancient wreck.

Having an Ascended Shadow by his side would be of enormous help.

…Sunny only noticed that a wide, stupid smile appeared on his face when Master Jet returned to the underground arena. He hurriedly erased it and stood up.

"All done?"

She gave him a relaxed nod, then yawned.

"Yeah. We are free to go… a little paperwork, and the contribution points I promised will be yours to spend. We can grab a bite first, if you want."

Sunny smiled.

'Oh yes… there is also the reward from the government.'

Now that he didn't need to spend all the contribution points on bringing Saint to full saturation as soon as possible… what else would he be able to get?

Chapter-512: Unburdened

Sitting on the very edge of the Sanctuary island with his feet dangling above the abyss of the Sky Below, Sunny was enjoying the view of the clear streams falling down into the darkness and turning into clouds of water dust.

After a while, he lowered his eyes and looked at the item laying on his palm with a bit of confusion.

'So… that's it?'

This was one of the two Memories he had exchanged for the contribution points given to him for helping Master Jet deal with Shadow Blade Kurt. It looked like a long, narrow needle forged out of black steel, with gold wire wrapped around one of its ends — sort of like an antique acupuncture needle, but much sturdier.

The needle's name was Heavenly Burden… a very ironic name for a Memory, here on the Chained Isles. He had just received it this morning, and this was his first opportunity to properly study the thing.

Very curious, Sunny summoned the runes:

Memory: [Heavenly Burden].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [To be free of a burden, one has to let go of all attachments they hold in their heart. Only those who untethered themselves from everything can become truly free.]

'Sounds wonderful...'

At first glance, the Memory wasn't too outstanding. Its Rank wasn't high, and neither was its tier. With the amount of money Sunny was making, he could probably buy something like this after a week or two of collecting soul shards in the Dream Realm.

But that was why contribution points were more valuable than credits. The government had access to things that were exceedingly rare or simply impossible to get on the market. Heavenly Burden was one such thing, and it was due to the enchantment the needle possessed:

Memory Enchantments: [Unburdened].

Enchantment Description: [Those pierced with this needle will rise to the skies.]

…Indeed, it was a Memory that could allow him to fly.

Sort of.

Flight enchantments were extremely rare and tremendously valued. In all honesty, Sunny had no business being able to get his hands on a Memory such as this — he was already incredibly lucky to have the Dark Wing, which, while not capable of true flight, was pretty close to it.

Usually, only Masters or Saints were able to purchase decent flight Memories. That was why Kai was so lucky… but Master Jet pulled some strings, and as the result, Sunny was currently holding the Heavenly Burden in his hands.

Well… from what he understood about the black needle, calling it a decent flight Memory was a bit of a stretch. Still, it was indeed capable of gifting him the ability to fly.

He grimaced a little, then thrust the needle into his forearm. However, nothing happened… well, of course it didn't. The thing failed to pierce the soft, but adamantine fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Sunny thought for a bit, and then enhanced the Heavenly Burden with one of his shadows. This time, the needle went through, and buried itself in his flesh.

'...Ouch.'

The pain was sharp, but not too bad. More than that, Sunny had no time to think about it… and that was because as soon as the Heavenly Burden pierced his skin, his body floated up.

…And continued doing so.

Sunny was steadily rising into the sky, be it at a slow speed. It was as though he had suddenly turned into a balloon. The feeling would have been rather funny, if it wasn't so terrifying — mostly because a sudden gust of wind threw him slightly to the side, and now, there was nothing but the darkness of the Sky Below beneath him.

Both amused and slightly tense, Sunny summoned the Dark Wing. He also summoned the Prowling Thorn, just to be on the safer side. After both Memories manifested themselves, he hesitated for a moment, and then wrapped the black needle in his second shadow, too.

Immediately, the speed with which he was rising into the air increased.

Sunny allowed himself to float upward for a few moments, and then commanded the Dark Wing to activate. With its help, he changed the direction of his flight, and slowly moved back toward the island. Making sure that there was solid ground under him, he then dismissed the Heavenly Burden and smoothly glided down.

'...Not bad!'

Now, he had two Memories to deal with what Cassie had seen in the vision of their supposed death. One Memory could only move him upward, while the other allowed him to glide in any direction except up. Together, they gave him the ability of true flight. Even if it was slow and not nearly as effective as what Kai could do, it was still flying.

The point was, he was not going to fall endlessly into the Sky Below

again… not unless he wanted to.

Sunny returned to the edge of the Sanctuary, sat down, and stared at one of the chains leading to a neighboring island.

It was early morning, and he was waiting for someone.

'They're still not here…'

With a sigh, he looked down and summoned the second Memory he received from the government. A piece of beautiful ember that looked like solidified flame appeared on his palm, inlaid in a frame made out of dull metal.

He summoned the runes:

Memory: [Memory of Fire].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Charm.

Memory Description: [...And then, there was nothing but flame.]

'Huh… short and sweet.'

Memory Enchantments: [Scorching Heat.]

Enchantment Description: [This charm provides the wearer with moderate resistance to fire.]

And that was that. With these two Memories, Sunny felt more or less ready to plunge into the dark abyss below the Chained Isles once more, when the time came. With Dark Wing and the Heavenly Burden allowing him to fly… or rather, float… and the [Underworld Armament] of the Mantle enhancing the protective effect of the Memory of Fire, his next trip to the Ebony Tower would be less perilous.

Hopefully…

His thoughts were suddenly interrupted. Looking at the chain, he noticed a row of black dots moving across it, far in the distance.

Straining his vision, Sunny sighed.

'They're here…'

Chapter-513: War Council

Soon, he was able to make out the silhouettes of eight people walking across the chain. They were led by a delicate beauty in a light polished armor, her pale blond hair dancing in the wind. Cassie walked with her eyes covered by the silver half-mask, her hand resting on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. If Sunny didn't know that she was blind, he would have not suspected it.

…The Fire Keepers had returned from their lengthy expedition to the Desecrated Grove.

In the end, it took them almost two months to find the… whatever they had been searching for on that remote and ghastly island. And now, it was time for Sunny to join them in the assault on the ancient shipwreck.

He grimaced.

After two months spent without returning to the real world, the members of Cassie's cohort looked weathered and exhausted. They were covered in dirt and dust, and their armor bore marks of countless battles. However, these young men and women seemed to be healthy and in good mood. There was a spring to their steps, and as they got closer, Sunny could see smiles on their lips.

Two of them were carefully carrying a large box fashioned out of crude wooden boards. He assumed that it contained the thing Cassie had spent two months looking for.

Sunny tilted his head, curious.

'What might it be, I wonder?'

Eventually, they noticed him, too.

Cassie slowed down a little, and in the next moment, the Fire Keeper walking behind her gently touched her on the shoulder and said something. Then, he gestured toward Sunny and waved a hand.

Sunny sighed and dismissed the Memory of Fire.

'Ugh… people…'

In the six months spent on the Chained Isles, he had gotten accustomed to only dealing with other Awakened in small doses. Knowing that he was going to have to be in the company of relative strangers for a while and fight with them side by side did not make Sunny happy.

In that regard, Mordret had been a perfect companion. He only appeared once every few days for a short while, helped Sunny with advice, and then disappeared without a trace, not asking for anything in return.

If only all relationships could be so simple…

Sadly, the mysterious prince was still nowhere to be found. Sunny had not heard from him ever since returning from the Ivory Tower, almost making him think that he had simply imagined the whole thing.

The mirror shard he kept in the Covetous Coffer reminded him that he had not, though.

Sunny forced a smile to appear on his face, and waved at the Fire Keepers in return.

"Welcome back, guys! It's good to see you... sort of..."

***

After the Fire Keepers had time to clean themself up and fill their stomachs, they gathered in a spacious room provided to them by the White Feather clan. Sunny looked around the room and sighed inwardly.

…Why were his own quarters so tiny? Even if his True Name

remained a secret, Sunny was still an SS class Awakened. Where was his preferential treatment, huh?

The large wooden box was placed in a corner, and the seven Awakened gathered around a table. He hesitated a little, then joined them.

"Hey, Sunny! How have you been?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then said in a neutral tone:

"...Busy. Really busy."

The young man who had asked him the question smiled.

"Really? What's keeping you busy?"

Sunny summoned his runes, and glanced at a particular string.

It read:

Shadow Fragments: [1936/2000].

He sighed.

"...All kinds of things. Haven't you heard? I am the most indispensable shopkeeper on the Chained Isles. By the way, if any of you want to purchase something, just let me know. Toothpaste, spices, underpants… we have it all!"

The Fire Keepers gave him strange looks, then laughed.

'What's so funny? That's a legitimate business, you fools!'

Shaking his head, he glanced at the table, where a map of the Chained Isles was placed, with possible routes to the Shipwreck Island marked on it. From the look of it, they were well-thought-out and as safe as could be.

A somber expression appeared on his face.

"So you were really serious. We are actually planning to attack a Corrupted Monster in its lair."

Cassie gave him a nod.

"Indeed."

He sighed.

"Let me ask you this. Are you cr…"

However, then, Sunny fell silent without finishing the question and suddenly cleared his throat in embarrassment.

The blind girl frowned.

"Are you alright?"

Sunny waved a hand.

"Yes, yes! Don't mind me. I, uh… oh right, you haven't been back to the real world in a couple of months."

One of the Fire Keepers raised an eyebrow, and asked with confusion:

"Sure? Why is that important?"

Sunny looked at him with an unreadable expression.

"It's not. Don't worry about it. No, really... anyway, let's get back to the Corrupted Monster. How much do you guys know about that thing?"

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then said:

"We know its Rank and Class, the general characteristics, and a few details that the White Feather clan had shared with us. Master Roan had fought the thing in the past, but only briefly."

Sunny looked at her, then shook his head.

"Well, I don't know what he told you, but I've seen that monstrosity in action with my own two eyes. So let me paint you the picture…"

He pointed to the Shipwreck Island on the map, and said in a dark tone:

"The wreck is situated in the center of the island, and the creature itself made a nest in its main cargo hold. Don't think that you'll be safe before we reach the ship, though. Actually, its vines stretch beneath the ground throughout the whole island."

He paused, and then added:

"Since it's a Corrupted Monster, most of you won't even be able to cut the vines, let alone sever them. You don't have the Dawn Shard augmenting your Memories anymore, after all. However, if you do manage to cut the vines, each cut will produce a cloud of poisonous mist. There will be poison in the air whether you cut them or not, though, especially inside the wreck.

There, breathing is almost impossible."

With each word he said, the Fire Keepers grew more and more serious.

…However, they were still in too good of a mood!

'What is wrong with these idiots?!'

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Oh, and by the way, there are other Nightmare Creatures on the island, too. Big nasty Fallen Beasts called Sailor Dolls."

He hesitated, and then said:

"Well, if there is one good about the whole situation, it's that the creature in the wreck usually slumbers until one of its vines is disturbed. Cassie told me that it is weak to fire. So my suggestion would be to just burn the whole ship down, and the scary bastard with it."

The Fire Keepers glanced at each other with strange expressions.

Cassie remained silent for a bit, and then said awkwardly:

"...No, we can't burn the ship."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"And why, pray tell, is that?"

She turned her head to the large wooden box in the corner, lingered for a moment, and then answered:

"Because we are going to repair it."

Chapter-514: Hidden Blade

Sunny was at a loss for words.

Had he even heard it right?

"You are going to… repair… the ancient, broken, monster-infected ship?"

Well… it made a lot of sense, actually.

Cassie nodded.

"Yes. We are going to cleanse, repair, and make it fly again."

Oh, so it was a flying ship, too!

'Perfect!'

Honestly, Sunny shouldn't have been surprised. All the clues had been there for a long time.

He had already known that the ship depicted on the miraculous coins was, most likely, the very same that lay broken on the Shipwreck Island. The connection was pretty easy to make, considering that they looked alike, and that the coins had come from its treasury in the first place.

Sunny had also asked himself the question of what a sailing ship was doing in the middle of Chained Isles, which had no sea and no rivers for it to sail on. The thought that it had actually been designed to fly through the skies had crossed his mind, among other things.

And finally, on the coins, the ancient ship was shown as having a beautiful tree wrapped around its mast. It had also belonged to the enigmatic person called Noctis. Wasn't it too much of a coincidence, then, that Cassie had come to the Sanctuary of Noctis and ventured

on a long expedition to a Desecrated Grove?

The word "desecrated" implied that the burned grove had been sacred once. After all, only sacred things could be desecrated. And a sacred tree sounded exactly like something capable of making a massive ship fly.

…Right?

Sunny stared at the large wooden box with a ponderous expression. After a while, he asked:

"So what's in the box?"

Cassie walked over and gently put a hand on its lid.

"...A sapling. We spent two months searching for a living root in that ghastly place. And finally, deep underground, we found the only one that remained. The wondrous tree which kept the ancient ship afloat in the sky had come from that grove, once. The sapling will grow into a new one."

She sighed, and then turned to the Fire Keepers:

"Shakti and Kaor were Artisans back in the Bright Castle. Shakti is gifted with an Aspect that helps plants thrive, and was Kido's apprentice. Kaor is an Awakened carpenter. We have more people on the way to the Chained Isles, too, to help with the reconstruction."

Sunny remained silent for a while.

So she had been planning to commandeer the ancient wreck for a long time. From before he had come to invite her to challenge the Second Nightmare with him… was it a coincidence? They were going to have to brave the Sky Below to get to the Seed, after all, and here was Cassie, conveniently planning to claim and repair a flying ship.

How much did she really know?

As if hearing his thoughts, Cassie turned to him. Her face suddenly turned somber.

"...With this ship, we might be able to cross the Hollow Mountains. At least… at least that is our hope."

The Fire Keepers grew quiet. After a while, the familiar girl — Shakti — said in a dark tone:

"We have to try, no matter what. Going there on foot is suicide. Maybe flying will be different."

They were all really, really resolute in their desire to find Nephis, it seemed.

And what about Sunny himself?

Well… things were complicated.

He sighed.

"Alright, that answers the question of why you want the ship, and how you might be able to repair it. But how are we going to defeat its current tenant without using fire? No offense, guys, but I really don't think that you can handle that fight. Maybe you can hold on for a while outside the wreck, but inside… it's a death trap."

The Fire Keepers looked at each other again. Finally, their mood turned dark.

Cassie hesitated for a few moments, and then said:

"We are going to kill it the old-fashioned way. Use someone as bait, and strike the monster down while it's distracted."

Sunny rubbed his face.

"Let me guess… I am the bait?"

The blind girl smiled, then shook her head.

"No. We are the bait. You are the blade that will pierce the creature's heart from the shadows."

That sounded solemn and sort of grand, but she immediately ruined

the moment by adding in an awkward tone:

"I mean… uh… if it has a heart. If it doesn't, then… well, you know. Kill it some other way."

'Not exactly the icon of eloquence, are we…'

Sunny frowned.

He did like the idea of not being the bait for once… well, to be honest, Neph was usually the bait. Actually, this plan sort of made sense. He already knew that he could survive in the poisonous miasma inside the ship, and that with enough augmentations, the Cruel Sight could damage the vines.

And that had happened even before he infused the [Dark Mirror] enchantment with divine flame. Yes, Sunny couldn't burn the ship itself, but that didn't mean that he couldn't deliver one surgical, immolating strike to the main body of the monster. The bastard was weak to fire, so the result would probably be nothing short of spectacular.

The problem was… would the Fire Keepers be able to keep the monster preoccupied long enough for Sunny to achieve his objective?

He looked at them gravely, and asked:

"Why are you all so sure that I can kill that thing?"

One of the Fire Keepers shrugged:

"You were in Lady Changing Star's cohort, were you not? She wouldn't trust just anybody to have her back. If she trusted in you, then so do we. No one weak survived the Forgotten Shore, anyway."

Sunny barely suppressed a laugh.

'Wouldn't trust just anybody to have her back…'

Oh, the irony! He almost wanted to tell them about how Neph made the person literally sent into the Dream Realm to kill her the second-in-command.

But of course, he did not.

"Yes, I suppose I was in her cohort."

Another Fire Keeper smiled.

"Plus, Cassie thinks that you'll be able to do it. She is rarely wrong, you know."

'Do I ever...'

Sunny scowled.

She wasn't wrong this time, however. In fact, her plan to deal with the thing that dwelled in the wreck was simple, but ingenious. Mostly because it relied on the only Awakened capable of delivering a fatal blow to such a creature... him. Without Sunny, it would have been really impossible.

What a fortunate thing, that he needed her help with something else...

He thought for a bit, and finally asked:

"Are you guys certain that you can survive drawing the monster's attention? Even after everything I told you?"

The young man who Cassie described as an Awakened Carpenter, Kaor, chuckled.

"Pretty certain. As much as one can be certain about anything in the Dream Realm, I guess? All of us survived the siege, so we're aware of what we are signing up for. We have a good combination of Aspects and know how to work together. We even have a healer, which should help against the poison. Point is, we are as ready as we ever going to be."

Sunny stared at him for a while, then looked down at the map, and sighed.

"Alright, then. Let's kill a Corrupted Monster."

Chapter-515: Traveling Together

The next day, Sunny left the Sanctuary in the company of the Fire Keepers. Traveling across the Chained Isles with Cassie and her cohort proved to be somewhat inconvenient — after all, they couldn't all turn into shadows and swiftly glide across heavenly chains as he could — but also a much more safe and pleasant experience than he was used to.

In fact, this was probably the most relaxed and serene journey Sunny had ever undertaken in the Dream Realm.

Even if the party moved slower, it was also much more battle ready and capable than any solitary Awakened could ever dream to be. Each of the Fire Keepers was a talented fighter with years of experience under their belt, and more than that, they fought together like a singular, finely tuned battle machine.

Even though Sunny didn't want to admit it, he had to give Cassie credit. Under her leadership, the cohort had become a beautifully cohesive battle unit in less than a year. She must have learned well from how Nephis had built her cohort, and then her army, back in the Dark City.

The fact that these young men and women shared a common past and had gone through a harrowing hell together must have helped a lot, too.

Whenever the party encountered Nightmare Creatures, Sunny felt a very strange and unfamiliar sensation… it was almost as if he didn't have to do anything. He could literally remain still, and nothing would happen to him — his temporary companions were more than capable of dealing with the abominations themselves.

Of course, that was only because the route they were taking had been carefully chosen to avoid the really dangerous places. There was

another reason for why this expedition was going so smoothly… Cassie herself.

Traveling with a powerful oracle was a very convenient thing, indeed. Not only was she able to steer the cohort clear of anything they were not equipped to deal with, she also had a supernatural intuition when it came to predicting which islands were going to enter into a descent, and which were going to rise instead.

Thanks to that, they were able to avoid being caught by the Crushing and having to either endure it or scramble to escape to the nearest isle — which could have landed them into the hunting territory of extremely powerful Nightmare Creatures.

Just like before, Sunny and she worked together to make sure that nothing unexpected happened. With Cassie's intuition and his shadows scouting ahead, the cohort always had plenty of time to avoid a confrontation with dangerous abominations or thoroughly prepare for it.

...It was almost like the good old times.

The fact that Sunny — unlike the Fire Keepers, who had spent most of their time on the Chained Isles up north — knew this part of the region pretty well also helped. On the way, they had passed through many islands that he had explored and hunted on before.

Plus, he had the Covetous Coffer now, which made their rest stops and meals much more enjoyable. So, as far as traversing the Dream Realm went, this journey was almost enjoyable.

After a calm and comparatively uneventful week, they finally reached the Shipwreck Island.

***

This close to the Tear, the Nightmare Creatures were much more dangerous and vile. Sunny and the Fire Keepers were currently on the island he had visited before — the one with dozens of stone towers laying in ruins, overgrown by moss, and monstrous worms hiding underground.

They had just fought off a swarm of them, and were now approaching the edge of the isle. Soon, the sight of the gargantuan chain stretching into the distance opened to them, and they heard the sound of rusty metal scraping against ancient iron on the wind.

The Fire Keepers froze and stared at the distant Shipwreck Island... and the corpse of the metal giant that was entangled in the remnants of a broken chain, swaying slowly above the dark abyss of the Sky Below. They were as stunned by this forlorn visage as Sunny had been when he first saw the mangled remains of the steel colossus.

After a while, one of them said:

"That wound in his chest… what kind of force could have shattered such a creature? And his arm… we saw it already, didn't we?"

Sunny didn't respond, since the question wasn't directed at him, and thus his Flaw remained silent.

Another Fire Keeper lingered, then asked in a curious tone:

"Maybe we should climb down and investigate, after taking control of the island?"

Sunny glanced at her, then shook his head.

"I wouldn't recommend that."

The young woman raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

A dark smile found its way onto his face.

"You think the monster in the wreck is bad? The being that dwells on the dark side of the island is much, much worse. Believe me. And that giant is well within its reach. In fact, I think that it uses him as bait to feed on the Chain Worms… those are Fallen Demons, by the way, and of a very nasty variety. They're just candy to that thing, though."

The Fire Keepers turned their attention to the underside of the Shipwreck Island, which was shrouded in darkness. Their faces

turned solemn, and after a while, one of them asked:

"But what is it?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I have no idea. I only saw the tip of its root. That is why I am still alive, most likely… if I saw the whole thing, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

After that, everyone remained silent. Sunny used that time to take another look at the two tall pillars that rose into the sky from the ancient stone structure on the other end of the chain.

Now that he knew that the ancient ship had been a flying one, the purpose of these pillars became clear, too.

They were wharves… or rather, mooring masts. The flying ship had to dock to something, after all, when it was not braving the vast expanse of the sky.

That made him think… there were several such pillars on the island, which suggested that Noctis had not been the only one in possession of a sky vessel in the ancient past. Maybe flying ships were how all the inhabitants of the Chained Isles traveled across the chasms of the Sky Below.

That made sense, really. The chains themselves were not exactly convenient roads, it's just that the Awakened used them for that purpose.

But how had the captains of the flying ships dealt with the Crushing? Or had there been no such curse on the Chained Isles before Hope escaped from its bonds?

His thoughts were interrupted by the loud rattling of the heavenly chain.

The Shipwreck Island was descending.

The Fire Keepers looked at each other. Their faces turned grim. Cassie gripped the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, and then said, her voice

calm and steady:

"Get ready. You all know the plan, so I won't waste time repeating it. Stay strong, stay together, and stay alive. Today, we will be victorious!"

Sunny stretched his neck, then summoned the Cruel Sight.

'Let's hope your intuition is right this time, too...'

Chapter-516: Legacy of Ruin

Returning to the Shipwreck Island felt strange. It was almost exactly the same, but also different.

They followed the remains of the ancient road and crested the hill to see the desolate valley below. The wreck of the once graceful ship was at its center, the dead tree wrapped around its mast. Thick vines were growing out of the breaches in its hull and spreading outward, some laying on the ground, some buried beneath it.

Here and there, piles of wooden debris could be seen — those were the Sailor Dolls, which had yet to assume their humanoid form after shapeshifting to withstand the Crushing.

What had changed, however, was that there was no chain on the other side of the valley anymore. The Twisted Rock had been destroyed and crumbled into the Sky Below, and now, the Shipwreck Island directly bordered the Tear.

Sunny felt as if the air itself was slightly different as the result.

He gestured at the wooden debris and said:

"Those are the Sailor Dolls. In a few minutes, they will assume their usual form, and after one notices us, the others will know of our presence, too. They'll swarm you pretty fast."

The Fire Keepers had already summoned their weapons and were prepared for a fight. The faces were calm, cold concentration burning in their eyes.

Cassie nodded.

"This is it, then. We will see you on the other side."

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then glanced at the members of the cohort. Out of habit, he had wanted to tell her to be careful, but then remembered who she was, and who he was, what they had been through together, and how it all ended.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"...Give them hell."

The Fire Keepers smiled. One of them laughed:

"I'm pretty sure that this place is already enough of a hell… you stay safe too, Sunny."

He sighed, then took a step back and disappeared into the shadows. Safely hidden in their dark embrace, Sunny observed as the Fire Keepers moved forward in a flexible battle formation. A few seconds later, he followed behind them unseen.

Soon, the piles of debris shuddered and started assembling into tall, menacing wooden humanoids, their arms ending with jagged blades.

The Fire Keepers did not wait for the first one to lunge at them, and launched an attack themselves.

Shakti, the former Artisan with an Aspect revolving around plants, drew a heavy bow, and sent an arrow flying. It hit the nearest abomination in the head and suddenly exploded into shards, creating a cloud of icy mist.

The creature swayed, then turned to face them, one side of its body in shambles. As it moved toward the humans, a thin crust of ice formed on its limbs, slowing the doll down.

Before it could strike with its blades, another Fire Keeper dashed forward and brought the blade of a heavy axe on its shoulder, severing one of the abomination's arms completely. Another appeared by his side, receiving a retaliatory strike on his shield. The young man grunted, but held his ground.

A moment later, the Sailor Doll was dead, hacked into pieces by the rest of the cohort.

'Not a bad start…'

But that was just the beginning.

Soon, the eight humans were surrounded by a dozen more Fallen Beasts, all towering above them with menacing, bloodthirsty determination. Things were about to turn bad for the Fire Keepers, but at that moment, Kaor — the Artisan specializing in carpentry — froze for a moment and narrowed his eyes. Immediately, a subtle change happened to the wooden creatures.

While not really rendered weak, they did, however, become a bit sluggish and slow. That made it possible for the members of the cohort to hold against the onslaught of the Nightmare Creatures a whole Rank above their own.

…It was not easy, though.

The Fire Keepers held their formation, but only just barely. The young man armed with the heavy axe was now using his Aspect Ability, which made the blade of his weapon shine with an angry red glow. It bit into the wooden flesh of the abomination he was fighting, penetrating much deeper than it should have been able to.

His partner was like a wall, refusing to take even a step back. He blocked strike after strike with his heavy shield, lashing out from behind it with a short spear from time to time to keep the enemies from simply overwhelming him with their size and mass. This was the healer of the cohort, so his fortitude and grit came from his physical prowess alone, not from any kind of Ability.

There was another Fire Keeper that used a shield, a young woman with dirty blond hair and an Aspect that allowed her to exert vicious strength with each strike of her sword. She fought in tandem with a young man who wielded two great swords… in his four hands. The second pair appeared when he activated his own Aspect Ability. These two were quite devastating together.

Shakti continued to fire her bow, switching between Memory arrows and mundane ones, which were crafted by Kaor. Her bow was powerful enough, and her aim precise enough, to deal heavy damage

to the advancing Sailor Dolls. The carpenter himself was sustaining the strange hex he put on the abominations and covering her with a wooden staff in his hands, his face grim and full of resolve.

Another Fire Keeper possessed an Aspect that allowed him to gift his companions with an augmentation to stamina and endurance, as well as making one of them much more resilient. He wielded a curved sword and covered Cassie's back.

…And then, there was Cassie herself. Who had turned out to be perhaps the most deadly of them all.

She wielded the Quiet Dancer in one hand and a long dagger in the other, using it to deflect blows and launch an unexpected, quick attack from time to time. The delicate girl wasn't the strongest, nor was she the fastest of the Fire Keepers. However, she fought with confident grace and deadly insight resembling that of a true master.

If it was anybody else, Sunny would have assumed that they had long reached the pinnacle of skill and were now able to not only flawlessly follow, but also control the flow of battle… it reminded him of how Nephis fought, of how deeply attuned she was to the underlying laws that governed combat.

Of course, the difference was that while Changing Star was able to predict and manipulate the cadence of battle due to her knowledge, talent, and skill… Cassie could actually perceive a few moments into the future.

Which made her a frightening presence on the battlefield.

As Sunny watched, a towering Sailor Doll raised one of its blades and brought it down on the blind girl, aiming to cut her body in half. However, Cassie simply moved slightly to the side a split second before the blade would have sliced her apart, and lashed out with her dagger. At the same time, the Quiet Dancer suddenly flew out of her hand and shot through the air.

The dagger pierced the creature's chest, while the rapier threw its second blade a few centimeters off course, then continued forward and tore through another abomination's neck.

In the span of a second, two Fallen Beasts were heavily wounded, and soon fell dead to the ground.

…Still, Sunny recognized the truth of it behind the superficial appearance. Yes, Cassie had an incredible advantage due to her unique and powerful Aspect. But not just anyone would have been able to make use of it.

In fact, almost no one could have done what she did.

In the havoc of a battle — especially a battle between Awakened and Nightmare Creatures, where a fraction of a second could mean the difference between life and death — it was already immensely hard to perceive, comprehend, and react to the enemy's actions in time.

It must have been so much harder, then, to perceive both the present and the future, to comprehend not one but two states of the battle, and swiftly act in response to achieve the result… not to mention that Cassie was doing all that while being blind. The mental strain and burden of it all… Sunny couldn't even imagine it.

What he did know, however, was that it was impossible to perform such a feat without one crucial thing.

Clarity.

…It seemed that Cassie had not listened to the lessons Nephis had taught them for nothing. She was Changing Star's other pupil, after all.

Soon, the Fire Keepers had dealt with the first wave of the Sailor Dolls. But the second, larger one was already approaching.

Before it could reach them, though, Cassie grabbed the Quiet Dancer from the air, turned to her cohort, and yelled:

"Prepare!"

Then, she covered her mouth and nose with a hand, turned the rapier down… and thrust it deep into the earth.

A moment later, the ground shook.

Chapter-517: Baiting the Monster

Suddenly, the whole of the valley seemed to be moving. The ground shook and seethed, and slowly, green and brown vines started rising from beneath it like vile snakes.

The hulking Sailor Dolls that were about to descend upon the Fire Keepers froze, as if consumed by fear. Then, they turned around and stumbled away. Some simply crumbled into piles of debris, pretending to be dead.

Even these Fallen Beasts were terrified of the being that dwelled in the heart of the ancient wreck.

Cassie and her cohort, however, remained unperturbed. Moving with swift determination, they made their preparations. Just a moment after the blind oracle thrust her rapier into the ground, the Fire Keepers had strips of cloth wrapped around their mouths and noses. The corpses of the slain Sailor Dolls were dragged to form a circle around them and set aflame.

Soon, the cohort was surrounded by a ring of tall bonfires, the eight Awakened bathed in the waves of heat. They stood back to back, their weapons drawn and their faces full of grim resolve. Only Shakti was on one knee, her hand pressed to the ground. After a moment, she screamed something.

…Sunny was still observing from the shadows, his emotions in turmoil. Although he would not go so far as to call these young people friends, he had grown somewhat attached to them after going through the ordeal of the civil war in the Bright Castle and traveling together. These Fire Keepers were a likable sort.

He didn't want to watch them die while doing nothing.

But that was his role in this fight… he had to remain safely hidden until the Corrupted Monster's attention was fully concentrated on Cassie's cohort, and then deliver one decisive strike, ending it all.

That time had not come yet.

Consumed by dark discontent, Sunny continued to watch.

Reacting to Shakti's scream, one of the Fire Keepers suddenly dashed to the side. A fraction of a second later, the moss beneath his feet was pierced by a stem of a brown vine. It thrashed blindly, failing to catch anyone in its deadly embrace, but then seemed to have sensed the presence of life, and shot toward the nearest human.

The vine was as thick as a man's arm, and there were black thorns protruding from its glistening surface.

One of the Fire Keepers sliced at it with her sword, but the sharp blade just bounced off of the vine without leaving even a scratch on its surface. Two others simply fell on it, pressing the thing down with their shields. That gave enough time for the young man whose Aspect allowed him to enhance his weapon-type Memories to bring his glowing axe down, severing the vine.

As soon as he did, a cloud of poisonous mist shot out from the cut, enveloping the young man. Luckily, he knew to hold his breath and immediately jumped back. Cassie, who had sheathed her rapier and was now holding a familiar wooden staff, pointed it forward and summoned the wind. The cloud of poison was blown toward the bonfires and devoured by flame.

'...That axe is an Ascended Memory.'

Indeed, it was. In fact, all of the Fire Keepers seemed to be equipped rather well, and several of them wielded weapons above their Rank.

Quiet Dancer was also not the only Echo in their possession. Just as another vine appeared from the flames, its stem singed and damaged, a familiar shape suddenly weaved itself from sparks of light just beyond the ring of bonfires and pounced on it. It was a creature that looked like a giant praying mantis, its flesh composed of glass and

bloodred clay.

Sunny remembered seeing these creatures during the siege of the Crimson Spire.

Two scythes came down on the vine, and bit deep into it. A moment later, the mantis dashed away with incredible speed, avoiding being entangled and shredded to pieces by the jagged black thorns.

Despite this efficient start, more and more vines were crawling toward the circle of fire, and several more appeared from beneath the ground inside it. With each moment that passed, the size of the vines attacking the Fire Keepers was bound to increase, too. The further from the wreck, the thinner and weaker the vines were.

But closer to the ancient ship, truly monstrous ones were already in motion, spreading outward with murderous intent. It was as though the monster was slowly unfurling its long limbs… which both spelled doom for the cohort of Awakened and was their intent.

Only when the primary vines were too far away from the main body of the creature to return at once could Sunny make his move. After that, he was either going to succeed and end the whole battle, preventing the Fire Keepers from perishing in the flood of vines… or they were all going to die together.

That moment of truth was swiftly approaching.

Faced with more and more vines, Cassie and her cohort did their best to resist. They cut apart those that were damaged by the fire enough for their weapons to become effective, and concentrated the efforts of several members on those which did not. But no matter how hard they fought, soon, the scales started to tilt in the favor of the Corrupted Monster.

Their formation was on the verge of being broken, and their actions, perfectly coordinated at first, were slowly turning desperate and hectic. Despite its terrifying speed, the Echo of the bloodred mantis was finally caught by the vines.

Its glass body was immediately shredded, and the creature was only

saved from being completely destroyed by the swift reaction of its master, who dismissed it just in time.

…That was the moment when the primary vines finally reached the ring of bonfires.

Sunny threw one last glance at the desperately fighting Fire Keepers. His gaze lingered on Cassie, who wielded her long dagger at the head of the cohort, for a few moments.

Then, he turned away and stepped through the shadows.

A second later, Sunny emerged from the gloomy shadow on the hull of the ancient ship, far away from the mayhem of battle…

And very close to the terrifying creature that was the source of all that horror.

Summoning the Cruel Sight, Sunny held his breath, and jumped into the darkness nesting in a jagged breach in the hull.

It was time for him to play his role.

Chapter-518: Cargo Hold

Landing into the poisonous miasma of the ancient wreck, Sunny immediately turned into a shadow and glided over the ancient wooden boards, which were long ago overgrown with brown moss and bulging, thorned vines.

To be honest, he would have preferred to move through the ship as a human. Sunny knew that he was going to inhale at least some of the poison while fighting the being that dwelled in the cargo hold, so having some time to get accustomed to the debilitating effect of the toxin was better than going through that process in the middle of the battle.

But he couldn't risk getting noticed too soon. The whole battle was supposed to be over in just a few moments, anyway... alas, Sunny had little hope that everything was going to go as planned.

His previous experiences had taught him that very few things ever did.

Remembering the path he had taken during the hunt for Noctis coins, Sunny glided through the narrow corridors. This time, they were vastly different from how they had been before… after all, the monster was wide awake now.

The vines sprawling through the ancient wreck were pulsating and moving, spouting clouds of deadly mist. The air was murky and full of disturbing sounds of something slithering beyond the wooden bulkheads. It was as though Sunny was inside a giant, living organism.

A virus cell that invaded the ancient wreck to kill its host.

…Luckily, these were mostly just the roots of the vile vines. The parts that were really mobile and dangerous were far away, currently

killing the cohort of Fire Keepers.

Suddenly grim, Sunny increased his speed, and soon reached the gates of the cargo hold, which were bent outward, as if straining to contain something pressing on them from the other side.

He could feel the vast space beyond the gate, and a massive shadow of the creature in its center, its form rhythmically expanding and contracting, as if breathing. With each contraction, a wave of warm wind blew through the remnants of the flying ship.

He lingered for a fraction of a second, and then gathered his resolve.

There was no time to waste.

Spending a small fraction of his essence to step through the shadows once more, Sunny appeared in the cargo hold… and froze, slightly stunned by the terrible visage of the Corrupted Monster.

'What… what the hell… is that?'

The cargo hold was very large, and filled almost entirely with thick, brown vines that snaked outward and disappeared in the breaches in the ancient wood. They all originated from a single source… a vast, pulsating mass of moss in its center.

In the very heart of the mass, however…

There was a shape of a human, their body twisted in a terrible convulsion. Sunny couldn't tell if the human was a man or a woman, alive or dead, but he was sure of one thing… the vines sprawling through the entire island all came from within the flesh of that creature.

They grew from the mouth of the abhorrent corpse, from their ears, piercing their chest and abdomen, snaking from beneath the skin of their arms and legs. The sight of it was both terrifying and repulsive, but most of all, it was… ghoulishly wrong.

It was as though the vines had once exploded from the body of the ancient human, killing them, but also somehow keeping them alive and breathing. And as long as the human breathed, the vines would

continue to exist and grow, too, slowly absorbing the ancient ship, the valley beyond, all of the Shipwreck Island, and then, one day… who knew?

'That… that is the thing I need to kill?'

Sunny had seen many horrors in his life, and killed his fair share of them, but no matter how experienced and powerful he became, there were things that humans were just not meant to be able to behold calmly. Staring at the ghastly being trapped in the cargo hold of the flying ship, Sunny didn't lose his composure or resolve… but he couldn't help but feel a deep, cold sense of fear.

Fear, however, was a welcomed guest… fear told him that he was still sane, and had some measure of humanity left in his soul. As long as Sunny did not surrender to fear, it was alright to feel it from time to time.

'One strike… get close, exit the shadows, and thrust the Cruel Sight into its chest. The divine flame is going to do the rest.'

Steeling himself, he began to glide forward, trying to traverse the vast cargo hold as quickly as possible.

The plan, however, went wrong just a moment later.

Because as soon as Sunny moved, and long before he was able to get anywhere near the terrible creature, the corpse suddenly opened its eyes.

Those eyes were empty, dead, and as dark as the abyss of the Sky Below.

…And they were staring directly at him, as if the creature could easily pierce the veil of darkness and separate the intruding shadow from all the rest.

Sunny was caught.

'N—no way…'

He froze for a fraction of a second, stunned by the fact that the

incredible stealth augmentation of his Aspect was broken with such ease.

And then, all hell broke loose.

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Sunny's first thought was to retreat and run as fast as he could. After all, he was currently a shadow… and as far as he knew, thorny vines and poison were not capable of harming a shadow.

But if he did so, the Fire Keepers were going to die.

And more than that, he was determined to kill this thing. He wanted its shadow fragments, its Memory — if there were to be one — and its secrets. The terrible creature had to die for his plans to go smoothly, for his challenge of the Second Nightmare to have as high a chance of success as possible.

So, he didn't run.

Instead, Sunny dashed forward, flying toward the pulsating mass of brown moss and vines with as much speed as he could muster. It was only going to take him a second to reach the ghastly corpse, as long as simply stepping through the shadows would.

However, the host of the ancient wreck did not remain idle.

Countless vines sprawling on the floor and the walls of the cargo hold suddenly surged, spewing clouds of poison, and more emerged from the mangled flesh of the ancient being.

These vines, however, did not shoot at Sunny in a futile attempt to catch a shadow.

Instead, they flew upward, tearing the hull of the ship apart.

Bright sunlight flooded through the wide breach, and as it banished the shadows populating the cargo hold, Sunny was suddenly expelled from their safe embrace, rolling on the floor while the sharp thorns of the vines bit into his flesh through the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

His thoughts were in a state of momentary panic.

'...Not good!'

Chapter-519: Trapped

Sunny rolled over his shoulder and jumped to his feet, the blade of the Cruel Sight slicing through a vine that was flying through the air to ensnare him. Blood was streaming down his back, and poison was entering his lungs.

What's worse, a concentrated dose of it must have been infused into his bloodstream by the black thorns. Sunny suddenly felt feverish and weak, and a sense of cold paralysis was spreading through the left side of his body, which took the most damage.

He was still able to move, and Blood Weave was already working to contain and devour the toxin. But before it prevailed, Sunny was in a dire situation.

Gritting his teeth, he dashed to the side, hoping to escape the sunlight and use Shadow Step to reach the abominable creature in the center of the cargo hold. Before he could dive into the saving darkness of the shadows, however, a massive vine crashed into the floorboards, shattering them and barring his way.

Sunny froze for a fraction of a second, realizing that there was nowhere to escape. Dozens of vines were already moving in his direction, glistening in the sunlight as clouds of murky mist escaped from the pores on their surface. Even though the root section of the vines was not very mobile, the sheer amount of them made it almost impossible to survive the onslaught.

What's worse, the vines were contracting, pulling more and more of their length into the cargo hold.

He cursed.

...At least the pressure on the Fire Keepers should have diminished.

Sunny, however... Sunny was one moment away from being killed.

He was not going to be able to reach the monster without the help of the shadows, but bathed in the merciless sunlight, he also had no chance of diving into their embrace.

All he could do was use his own.

Commanding one of the shadows to unwrap itself from his body, Sunny sent it toward the ghastly corpse and staggered as the strength and resilience provided by it disappeared. The second shadow slid from the Cruel Sight and attached itself to his feet, meant to serve as a threshold through which he was going to step.

Now, all he had to do was to survive the short second it was going to take the first shadow to reach its goal.

…That was easier said than done.

Straining the flexibility of his body to its limit, Sunny felt his joints groan and his tendons tremble on the verge of tearing apart. Twisting at an almost impossible angle, he dodged one of the vines, placed his hand on the spongy carpet of the brown moss, and performed a bizarre spin, narrowly sliding between two more.

If not for the torturous training he had put himself through to accommodate the inhuman demands of Shadow Dance, this would have been impossible.

Feeling the skin of his palm burn, as though submerged in stomach acid, he retrieved his hand from the brown moss and immediately jumped backward to save himself from being entangled in the slithering vines. He was swift enough to avoid being caught, but not swift enough to escape unscathed.

The black thorns tore into his right side, and more blood flowed down his body, while more poison entered his bloodstream.

"Argh!"

Sunny ducked, dashed desperately to the side, then rolled and threw himself upward from an impossible position, feeling his ligaments rip.

Dodging the swarm of vines was like being a fly surrounded by a contracting mass of spiderwebs.

Luckily, he only had to survive in their lethal, moving maze for a second.

Before the vines could turn into an impenetrable barrier all around him, Sunny dove into his shadow and emerged right in front of the vile mass of brown moss… and the remains of the human encased within it.

The Cruel Sight flashed with pure light, and in one fluid motion, he thrust its incandescent blade into the chest of the monster.

'Got you!'

And then…

Nothing happened.

The corpse didn't react to receiving a mortal wound at all. Its ghastly face remained unmoving, its eyes full of terrifying emptiness, its body a harrowing mess of torn flesh and slithering brown vines.

The mass of moss continued to contract and expand, and the vines themselves continued to pursue the invader. Even the divine flame seemed to have no effect on the Corrupted Monster.

Sunny paled.

'Crap…'

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He twisted the Cruel Sight, hoping that it would have some effect, but all was in vain. The Corrupted Monster simply refused to die, for whatever reason, and the ancient remains that were its source appeared to be immune to flame, even if the vines themselves were susceptible to it.

The information Cassie shared with him came from Master Roan, who had fought the vines once. But he had never entered the wreck,

so of course, the dashing griffin rider couldn't have known that the creature itself did not share the weaknesses of its sprawling thorned limbs.

'Damn! Now what?!'

The vines were already upon him…

Before they could ensnare Sunny, though, two ruby eyes ignited in his shadow, and a graceful figure of the demonic knight lunged forward out of it. The blade of her stonelike sword flashed through the air, easily severing several vines, and then her shield crashed into the slithering vernicose wall, pushing it away and making the whole cargo hold shudder.

Now that Saint was Ascended, and augmented by one of his shadows, her strength was truly frightening. The taciturn demon spun in the mass of vines, cutting them down like a demented gardener. For a moment, none of them could reach her.

Sunny wrapped the second shadow around himself and retrieved the Cruel Sight, thinking feverishly.

'What the hell… how do I kill this thing?!'

He could try to place the Broken Oath near it and retreat… but no, that wouldn't work. Unlike the Mordant Mimic, who had been paralyzed by the Crushing, the being trapped in the cargo hold of the ancient ship could simply move the charm away with one of its vines, or crush it.

And if Sunny tried to prevent it from doing so, he would succumb to the soul damage first. Even with the help of the Mantle of the Underworld, he would still be just an Awakened… a Corrupted Monster's soul was much, much more vast and resilient.

Leaving Saint to fend for herself was also not an option, since even with her newfound might, she had no chance of surviving in a battle against this powerful creature alone. Not all Corrupted Monsters were created equal, and the two of them had the misfortune of stumbling on an especially dreadful one.

So… what else was there?!

Sunny couldn't damage the abhorrent abomination itself… but he could damage the vines. That would buy him some time to come up with a solution, at least…

Jumping back, he sliced at the root of a thick vine growing out of the ancient human's forearm, severing it. As a side effect of this attack, the corpse seemed to retrieve some control of its hand, which slowly rose and stretched toward Sunny.

'Damn!'

Suddenly feeling a sickening, cold sensation in his heart, he hurried to create as much distance between himself and the corpse as he could.

However, the abomination didn't seem to be launching an attack. Its hand strained to rise, held down by the mass of vines growing from it. Struggling against this terrible burden, it twitched and moved slightly, then froze. One of its fingers trembled.

The creature… seemed to be pointing at something.

And for the first time, the expression in its empty eyes changed, betraying that there was still a hint of consciousness trapped in this mangled body.

Those terrible eyes were not burning with bloodlust, hunger, or wrath. Instead, they were full of harrowing agony and… pleading.

Chapter-520: Deliverance

Sunny almost stumbled because of the terrible realization.

Was the mutilated body inside the nest of moss… still alive?

'How could that be?'

Thousands of years must have passed since the flying ship crashed on this desolate island. How long had this poor soul suffered this harrowing torture? What sin had they committed, and who had doomed them for an eternity of ghastly suffering? How had the vines ended up growing from their flesh, and why?

But most importantly… how the hell was that mangled thing not dead?! Even divine flame was powerless to end its grisly, gruesome existence.

If Sunny could find the answer, maybe he would be able to kill the Corrupted Monster, after all.

Using the momentary lull in the onslaught of the vines that Saint's appearance had bought him, he faced away from the fight and tried to understand what the host of the abominable growth was pointing at.

He desperately hoped that the ancient human was, indeed, trying to point at something, and not just convulsing in terrible pain.

'Where is it… what is it…'

His gaze flew to a certain point on the wall of the cargo hold and lingered on it.

At first glance, there was nothing different about it. That section of the bulkhead was just like all the rest, ancient and overgrown with

brown moss. But as he looked closer, he noticed a small gap in the layer of moss, as well as a strange bend to the vines growing on that particular wall.

It was as though they, too, wanted to avoid something lodged into the wooden boards.

That had to be it!

However, Sunny didn't see anything in the small circular gap, just a splinter of wood sticking out of it at a sharp angle. His heart was beating like a wild beast in a cage, consumed equally by hope and despair.

Throwing a glance at Saint, who was slowly drowning in the flood of slithering vines, he hesitated for a moment, and then rushed toward the wall instead of joining her in the fight.

'There has to be something… there has to be!'

He was certain that the ancient human pointed at that section of the wall for a reason. Or rather, he hoped that they had…

Jumping over an attacking vine and staggering sideways to avoid another one, Sunny slashed, hacked, and tore his way through the cargo hold, feeling more wounds appearing on his body and more poison flowing through his bloodstream.

At this point, even Blood Weave was having trouble resisting the deadly toxin. Well… it was miraculous enough that he could withstand it at all, considering that the poison came from a creature two whole Ranks above Sunny. Weaver's lineage was, indeed, a terrifying thing. Maybe there was a reason for why it was described as forbidden…

Finally, Sunny sliced through the last vine in his way, leaving it broken and singed, and crashed into the overgrown bulkhead near the small gap in the brown moss. Drawing in a hoarse breath, he stared at it with enough intensity to melt stones.

'Wait… is it?'

His eyes widened slightly.

The thing that he had thought to be a splinter turned out to be something else.

Out there on the wall of the cargo hold, thrust deeply into it by someone's hand, was a rather simple-looking knife. Its shape, however, was very familiar to Sunny.

It was exactly the same as the knife that lay on the white altar of the Sanctuary of Noctis, except for the fact that this one wasn't cut from a single piece of obsidian.

However, it also wasn't cut from ivory.

...Instead, it seemed to be made entirely of wood, as if a tree branch had somehow grown in the shape of a knife, and was then broken off to become one.

'What does it mean?'

Sunny allowed himself to remain confused and perplexed for a split second, and then decisively grabbed the handle of the knife.

'Act now, think later! Damn it all... please don't tell me that I need a thousand coins to lift this one, too!'

Luckily, this time, there was no need for an offering. Although it took some effort, a moment later, the wooden blade slid from where it was thrust into the wall, and Sunny found himself holding the Cruel Sight in one hand, and the strange wooden knife in the other.

Something else happened, though.

As soon as he laid his hands on the wooden handle, all the vines in the cargo hold surged in his direction with frenzied fury, utterly forgetting about Saint and her vicious sword.

Sunny paled.

'Crap!'

Before the mass of slithering vines could crush him, he abandoned all attempts to escape and thrust his hand forward instead.

…The wooden knife slipped from his grip, cut a sharp arc in the air, and was nimbly caught by Saint.

Without wasting the opportunity that the sudden shift in the Corrupted Monster's behavior gave her, the taciturn demon immediately dashed toward the pulsating mass of brown moss… and thrust the wooden knife right into one of the ancient human's empty eyes.

In the next moment, the whole wreck shuddered.

The mass of moss violently contracted, throwing Saint away. The vines suddenly lost any semblance of cohesion and thrashed violently, forcing Sunny to retreat as close to the wall as he could. Still, the sea of black thorns was mere centimeters away from his face, raging in a storm of chaotic movements.

Even the brown moss he was pressed against seemed to be convulsing, as if overwhelmed by unbearable pain.

Despite all that, the only thing Sunny saw was the one remaining eye of the terribly malformed ancient human.

It stared at him for a few moments, the emptiness and darkness slowly giving way to something else. A feeling of relief so vast that it was almost beyond the concept of emotion.

Then, that look of deliverance was gone, too.

The terrible eye was empty once again, now truly and forever.

The head of the ancient human lifelessly rolled back.

And as soon as it did, the vines suddenly fell to the ground, too, dead and motionless.

Suddenly weak, Sunny powerlessly slid to the floor.

The voice of the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have slain a Corrupted Monster, Wormvine.]

[You have slain a Transcendent human, Solvane.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Chapter-521: Undying Chain

Sitting on the floor of the cargo hold, with his back against the soft and spongy layer of rotting brown moss, Sunny bent down and spat a mouthful of blood. Breathing hoarsely, he stared at it for a moment, and then tiredly leaned back.

He did not feel too well.

[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

A bitter smile appeared on his face.

'What? Is that all?'

After all that had just happened, Sunny felt that he really deserved more.

This time, his hopes were not for naught.

The Spell remained silent for a bit, as though to torture him, and then added:

[You have received a Memory.]

'...Better.'

After that, he groaned and coughed some more blood.

All around Sunny, the brown moss was rotting, withering, and turning into dust. The same thing was happening to the vile mass of vines, albeit at a slower rate. Now that both the Corrupted Monster and its host were dead, the ancient wreck seemed to be cleansing itself.

He couldn't be bothered to pay attention to these changes, though, and was fully concentrated on his own miserable state.

Even though the whole battle took less than a minute, Sunny had sustained a lot of damage. His body was pierced and torn by the black thorns, and he had too much poison running through his veins. One of his ligaments seemed to be seriously torn, too, which brought him a lot of pain now that the adrenaline was starting to dissipate.

The Puppeteer's Shroud was a wonderful armor and accompanied him on his misadventures from almost the very start of it all, but Sunny had to reluctantly admit that with the caliber of enemies he was facing these days, its protective qualities left a lot to be desired. Sadly, even such a powerful Memory could not keep up with the progress of its master.

If there was one good thing about his condition, though, it was that the effects of the poison did not seem to be growing stronger. Blood Weave had the situation under control, and he was bound to feel better soon.

In any case, the battle was over. The plan worked, in the end, even if killing the Wormvine had turned out to be much more complicated than anyone would have thought. Still, somehow, Sunny had managed to achieve his goal.

The Fire Keepers… if they were still alive… were going to have to clean up the remaining Sailor Dolls should the beasts regain their courage after the Corrupted Monster's death, but he couldn't muster enough energy to care, at the moment.

Saint stared at the quickly disintegrating corpse of the person who had once been called Solvane for a bit, then walked over and stood above him silently, looking away in her usual indifferent manner.

Sunny rested for a while, not even summoning the runes to take a look at his new Memory. Slowly, his exhaustion diminished, and he could think clearly once again.

As that happened, numerous questions inevitably assaulted his mind.

What had happened in the cargo hold of the ancient ship was just too peculiar…

Who was Solvane, and how had they ended up as the host of the Wormvine? How had they survived for thousands of years? Why was Solvane immune to divine flame and couldn't be harmed by the Cruel Sight, but succumbed to one strike of the wooden knife?

Where had that knife come from, in the first place? And why was it so similar to the obsidian one that lay on the altar in the Sanctuary of Noctis?

As Sunny considered all these questions and found no answers, one thought gradually encompassed all the others:

'A Saint… I killed a Saint?'

The Spell had described Solvane as a Transcendent human, which was what Saints were really called. Sunny knew it to be true, but still couldn't quite believe it.

He was not someone to sell himself short, but not even in his wildest dreams had Sunny ever considered being able to kill a Saint… at least not at his current Rank. Saints were simply creatures of another plane, unrivaled demigods with enough power to level entire cities.

Technically, a Corrupted Monster was of the same Rank as a Saint, and even possessed one more soul core… but there was no comparison. Due to their Aspects and nature, Transcendent humans were much more of a force to be reckoned with than any beast or monster could ever hope to be. Only a devil of the same Rank, or maybe a powerful demon, could stand a chance in a battle against them.

And yet, Sunny had killed one.

He had also killed a Corrupted Monster, with the same strike.

Well, technically, it was Saint who had delivered the strike… but it didn't matter. The result was the same.

'Now that is definitely something that no one is going to believe, huh?'

Sunny chuckled, then grimaced from pain, and finally summoned the

runes.

The first thing he did was check his fragments. The number was just as he expected:

Shadow Fragments: [1958/2000].

He had managed to kill a few Nightmare Creatures on the way to the Shipwreck Island, and killing a human and a monster two Ranks above him gave twelve more fragments — four from the Saint, and eight from the Wormvine. Sunny sighed, lamenting the unfairness of his Aspect for the thousandth time, and looked at the list of his Memories.

New runes appeared at the end of the list. He held his breath and read:

Memory: [Undying Chain.]

Memory Rank: Transcendent.

His heart started to beat faster.

'At long last!'

This was the first Transcendent Memory he had acquired… which was a very pleasant milestone. Granted, an Awakened like him was not even supposed to have Ascended Memories, let alone something one whole Rank higher.

But then, an average Awakened rarely had to fight things above their Rank, too.

Pleased, Sunny continued to read:

Memory Tier: III.

'Huh?'

How was this possible? The Memory could have either come from the Wormvine, in which case it was supposed to be of the second tier, or from Solvane, in which case it was supposed to be of the first.

However, it seemed as though the Undying Chain had actually come from both of his kills, maybe because Solvane and the parasitic Wormvine were irrevocably connected. As such, it ended up being of the third tier!

Sunny had not even known that something like that was possible.

Even more pleased, he grinned in satisfaction and returned his attention to the runes:

Memory Type: Armor.

His eyes glistened.

"Now that... that's what I'm talking about!"

Chapter-522: Invincible

Sunny was really beyond himself. A good armor was exactly what he needed… and what could be better than a Transcendent one? Most of the enemies he fought would not even be able to scratch it, let alone pierce it!

His smile turned a little bitter when he remembered receiving the Puppeteer's Shroud and imagining how he would be nearly invincible to all the dormant creatures trying to attack him come winter solstice.

Who knew that he would end up in a place where there was not even a single dormant bastard around? Not counting Sunny himself and all the other misfortunate Sleepers on the Forgotten Shore, of course.

Still, he would have died a hundred times if it hadn't been for the Puppeteer's Shroud. The Undying Chain was an undeniable improvement, so he had high hopes for it.

Moving his gaze lower, he read the armor's description:

Memory Description: [In a beautiful tower at the end of the world, desire was bound by seven brilliant shackles. She was meant to be chained there forever, and so her shackles were made eternal. Yet in the end, desire was unleashed upon the world. Her shackles were destroyed, and the will of the gods was broken.]

Sunny stared at the shimmering runes, wondering.

He knew that the Spell, for whatever reason, behaved strangely when speaking about daemons. In fact, he had never seen or heard it use that term, as though the word itself was somehow forbidden. Sunny only learned it from the writings left behind by the prisoner of the hidden cell beneath the ruined cathedral in the Dark City.

The closest the Spell had ever come to mentioning the word daemon was calling the Prince of the Underworld a prideful demon.

Yet, there was no doubt that the desire it spoke about here was a daemon… the Demon of Hope, who had been once chained in the Ivory Tower. Sunny had seen the place where she had been imprisoned himself, as well as the Seed of Nightmare growing from her broken shackles.

At first glance, the meaning of the description was rather obvious. Or at least it was to him, with how much he already knew.

But something told Sunny that it wasn't.

The thing that didn't seem to add up was the fact that he had received the Undying Chain for killing Solvane — or the Wormvine — both of whom had seemingly nothing to do with the description.

Unless he was thinking about it all wrong…

Wormvine was susceptible to fire, as well as other means of dealing damage powerful enough to wound the abomination's flesh. But Solvane… was not so simple. The Saint from whose flesh the terrible monster had been born seemed immune to any form of harm, including the immolating divine flame.

Almost as if Solvane was... immortal.

That would certainly explain how the poor Saint had survived thousands of years of harrowing torture after becoming Wormvine's host, and why the Memory Sunny received from their death had the epithet of Undying.

Was there a second, less literal meaning to the seven brilliant shackles mentioned in the description of the Undying Chain? Which, apparently, were made eternal…

Just like Solvane had been.

Sunny frowned.

'This is just too weird…'

Even if his tentative theory was technically not impossible, the existence of the wooden knife went against it. What was that knife, and why had it killed Solvane when nothing else seemed to have been able to?

The knives, perhaps, were an even greater mystery.

In any case, he didn't have enough information yet to try and glean the truth. With a sigh, Sunny returned to the runes. Learning what his new armor could do was much more interesting than trying to guess at the ancient mysteries with no clues, anyway.

Memory Enchantments: [Chains of Longing], [Brilliant Will], [Undying].

[Chains of Longing] Enchantments Description: "This armor provides the wearer with high protection against mind attacks."

Sunny blinked.

'What are the chances?'

Resistance to mind attacks was the second-rarest form of protection, right after resistance to soul damage. And yet, this was the third armor-type Memory he had received that boasted it. His luck was incredibly good!

…Or maybe his tendency to run into especially terrible monsters was incredibly bad.

In any case, this enchantment made sense. If this Memory was connected to the imprisonment of Hope, whose powers had been most likely tied to mind manipulation, then having protection against such attacks was logical.

The fact that the Undying Chain had only three enchantments, as opposed to five of the Mantle of the Underworld, was also to be expected. The tier of a Memory seemed to dictate how many enchantments it could accommodate, and the Mantle, despite being of a lower Rank, was higher by a few tiers.

The second enchantment of the Undying Chain was very interesting.

[Brilliant Will] Enchantments Description: "This armor becomes stronger when worn by those of divinity."

Sunny grinned.

Even without looking at the Undying Chain and its spellweave, he could tell how this enchantment worked. It was an overall enhancement based on how high the wearer's divine affinity was. Which meant that a random Awakened would not receive any augmentation to the resilience of their armor, while someone with the [Mark of Divinity] Attribute would receive a decent amount.

Sunny, though? With his [Ember of Divinity], the augmentation would be enhanced threefold. It was a very solid enchantment.

'This is great!'

When his eyes fell on the third enchantment, though, he forgot all about his previous joy, intense as it was. His eyes widened slightly.

The runes read:

[Undying] Enchantment Description: "The wearer can not die."

Sunny tilted his head.

'...What?'

Being unable to die surely sounded great… even if he had just seen what terrible fate had befallen Solvane.

However, Sunny quickly realized the limitations of this seemingly breathtaking enchantment. Unlike [Chains of Longing] and [Radiant Will], [Undying] was an active one. And he was willing to bet that sustaining it required an ocean of souls essence.

Considering that Sunny was just an Awakened, his reserves would probably only amount to one moment of immortality.

Still, one moment of immortality was more than fantastic!

'...If used wisely.'

Sunny could imagine a lot of situations where this enchantment could save his life… but even more where using it would only amount to postponing his death by a fraction of a second.

It was an amazing, but very dangerous tool.

Full of thought, but extremely satisfied, Sunny stood up.

Gunlaug, too, had possessed a Transcendent armor… however, his golden Echo now felt inferior to the [Undying Chain]. The Bright Lord seemed so invincible and terrifying once, but Sunny had long surpassed him. And now, his arsenal did, as well.

...It was a strange feeling.

With a sigh, Sunny dismissed the torn and bloodied Puppeteer's Shroud, then summoned the [Undying Chain].

Immediately, a slender metal armor weaved itself from nothingness around his body. It was forged out of lusterless, bleak steel… which looked very similar to the iron from which the heavenly chains themselves were made.

The armor covered his body almost entirely, and the few gaps left between the fitted plates of steel showed a layer of thin, but incredibly strong chain mail underneath. His face became hidden behind a helmet that looked like a featureless mask, with only several vertical lines cut into it to provide a decent level of visibility.

Shadow nested in the slits of the visor, creating a dark and ominous visage.

There was a piece of black cloth wrapped around his waist, held in place by a wide belt fashioned out of dark leather, as well as a hood that provided additional protection to his head and neck.

Surprisingly, the armor didn't seem very heavy, and neither did it restrict his mobility by much. The design was so intricate, and the steel plates fitted so perfectly to his body and to each other that it felt like a second layer of skin… if that skin was cast of impenetrable steel.

Of course, the Undying Chain wasn't as light as the Puppeteer's Shroud, but Sunny could move freely while wearing it, all the while not producing almost any sound.

In exchange, it provided a vastly larger amount of protection.

Standing in the cargo hold of the ancient ship, clad in his new Transcendent armor, Sunny couldn't help but feel invincible.

'...Disabuse yourself of that thought, fool.'

He smiled darkly, then looked at Saint.

"Well? What do you think?"

The taciturn demon didn't answer, of course.

However, Sunny could swear that the glow of her ruby eyes, which were hidden behind the visor of a similarly closed helmet, became a bit…

Approving.

His smile widened, but then slowly disappeared.

"A steel armor..."

Suddenly grim, Sunny dismissed his helmet and turned in the direction where the Fire Keepers were supposed to be.

After a few moments, he said quietly:

"I see..."

Chapter-523: Made Eternal

Blood Weave was slowly devouring the toxin, but Sunny still felt weak and feverish. Dismissing Saint, he walked around the cargo hold, getting used to the feel of the Undying Chain and looking around to see if there was something interesting laying around.

Like another chest full of Noctis coins, for example.

Sadly, he didn't find anything. Even if the cargo hold had once stored ancient curios and treasures, everything was destroyed by the vines and the brown moss over thousands of years.

However, he was pleasantly surprised to realize that the lusterless steel armor was not constricting his movements at all. It was really like a second layer of skin… perhaps if Sunny wasn't augmented by the shadow, the Undying Chain would have been cumbersome. But he was, and on top of that, there were almost two thousand shadow fragments stored in his two cores.

Even if an Awakened wasn't supposed to be able to wear the Transcendent armor effortlessly, Sunny had no such problem.

'Sweet…'

Finally, he limped over to the pile of dust that remained of Solvane and knelt beside it, then reached inside the ashes and retrieved the wooden knife.

Of course, Sunny had not forgotten about it.

To his disappointment, though, what he was holding in his hand was just the handle. The blade had splintered and broken off, and the wood seemed lifeless and dead.

It was already starting to rot, and even when Sunny looked beneath

the surface of the strange knife, he didn't see anything… no spellweave, no brilliant radiance of a sea of soul essence, and no String of Fate folding endlessly on itself in a perfect circle.

The wooden knife was truly and utterly broken.

Almost as if it was created for a singular purpose, and had no reason to exist after fulfilling it.

Sunny looked at the knife with a thoughtful frown.

'Interesting…'

Was the wooden knife created specifically to bring death to the immortal Solvane? If so, were the obsidian knife in the Sanctuary of Noctis and the ivory knife in the Night Temple meant to end the lives of two other immortals?

Suddenly, he shivered.

A single String of Fate, folded on itself and creating a perfect circle…

If he had looked into the wooden knife before it was destroyed, would he have seen the same thing?

A tentative hint of understanding appeared in his mind.

Somehow, Sunny felt that he would. He also suspected that the String of Fate would not have been just a random one.

No… it would have been Solvane's fate.

A String that was somehow torn out of the tapestry of Fate and tied in an endless circle… would something like that make a person immortal?

"And so the shackles were made eternal…"

Who could have done such a terrifying thing?

Well, the answer was rather obvious. The Lord of Light, Sun God, who had destroyed Hope's kingdom and imprisoned her in the Ivory

Tower, certainly could. After all, he was not only the deity of flame and light, but also of passion, creation, and destruction.

Looking at the remains of the wooden knife that were rotting and turning to dust in his hand, Sunny couldn't help but shudder.

If he was right, then he was holding a weapon created by a god.

…And he had used that weapon to kill an immortal created by a god.

For the first time since Sunny had learned about the divinities of the Dream Realm, he suddenly felt really glad that they were dead.

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Some time later, he jumped through the breach created by the Wormvine and climbed onto the ancient ship's hull. Hissing from pain, Sunny staggered a little, then limped toward where the wreck ended.

Since the ship was laying on its side, the wooden surface beneath his feet was inclined down and uneven. Almost inevitably, he lost his balance and rolled the last stretch of the way, landing on the ground in a graceless heap.

"...Ouch."

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then sighed and picked himself off the ground. Standing up, he studied the desolate valley, and then headed to where he had seen the Fire Keepers last.

The landscape of the Shipwreck Island was changed. The ground was overturned and scarred by deep trenches, looking like a battlefield of an ancient war. Some of the trenches were empty, some were filled with massive stems of dead vines that protruded from the soil like rotting serpents. The air was filled with dust, ash, and smoke.

Using the Cruel Sight as a staff to support his weight, Sunny limped forward and soon found the ring of bonfires.

A pale smile appeared on his face.

'Well, what would you know… they actually survived.'

Indeed, the Fire Keepers seemed to be all there. Granted, they looked incredibly exhausted, battered, and injured all over.

All of them were covered in blood, dirt, and soot, their armor torn. Some were sitting with tired expressions on their faces, others lay on the ground, with only the movement of their chests betraying that they were alive. Only the steadfast young man who had wielded a short spear and a heavy shield in battle — the healer of the cohort — was up and about, tending to his companions.

Sunny walked between two of the bonfires and stopped, leaning on the Cruel Sight.

His eyes darted around, lingered on the delicate figure of a young woman with pale blond hair for a moment, and then turned away.

"...Sunny?"

He glanced at Shakti, the Artisan girl, who was resting on the ground a few steps away from him.

The young woman looked more or less like a corpse. Her armor was almost destroyed, revealing deep lacerations on her tanned skin, and her face was dirty and pale from blood loss. What's worse, her right arm was torn away, ending in a bloodied bandage near the elbow... such a wound was not permanent, since it was dealt to her spirit body and not the actual one, but still quite severe.

Nevertheless, there was a wide grin on the Artisan's face.

Looking him over, she whistled and said:

"New armor? Looking good!"

She tried to laugh, but then bent over in a fit of violent coughing. It seemed that all of them were still suffering from the effects of the Wormvine's poison, even if the healer had used his Aspect to make it less lethal.

The others looked in their direction, alerted to his arrival by Shakti's

voice. Their eyes brightened.

"Thank the gods! Sunny, you're alive!"

"Good work out there!"

"Crazy bastard… you actually did it?"

Sunny couldn't help but smile.

"Obviously. Why wouldn't I? It was just a Corrupted Monster…"

His smile widened.

"...Actually, I also went and killed an immortal Saint that happened to be nearby. One strike for the both of them, to not waste any time. All it took was a minute."

The Fire Keepers stared at him for a bit, then rolled their eyes.

Shakti shook her head.

"Sure, Sunny. If you say so. But really… I just don't get you. Killing a Corrupted Monster is already an incredible thing, why do you even have to invent some ridiculous story…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times with an innocent look.

"What do you mean, invent a story? It's the truth! I am a very honest person. The most honest person in two worlds, really…"

Chapter-524: Forty-Two

Sunny slumped on the ground, summoned the Endless Spring, and greedily drank some water. Since his injuries were light... well, at least compared to those received by the Fire Keepers... it was some time before the healer got to them. But, eventually, it was his turn to receive treatment.

The healer — a young man named Shim — was pale and exhausted, his soul essence clearly almost entirely depleted. Still, he managed to repair the ligament Sunny had torn while dodging the vines to a large extent. It hurt like hell, though.

Of course, this healing Ability couldn't compare to Neph's purifying white flames. But then, it was hard for anyone to compare to Neph. Sunny knew it better than anyone.

With a dark expression, he summoned the runes and glanced at the painfully familiar string of them:

Shadow Fragments: [1958/2000].

He was only forty-two fragments away from evolving into a demon. This transformation was not only going to allow him to reinforce his body and reserves of shadow essence even further, but also reward Sunny with a third shadow.

Having another invaluable helper would increase his power tremendously, making him capable of stacking three augmentations on top of each other, or spreading them over between his body, his Memories, and Saint.

He was almost to two thousand fragments.

To accumulate so many in only seven months… that was an achievement worth celebrating. Very few Awakened ever fully

saturated their cores, and those who did usually spent long years slowly collecting soul shards of the Nightmare Creatures they killed. Decades, even... and that was for only one core. Sunny could be proud of himself.

And yet, he didn't feel happy.

Looking lower, he concentrated on another, much shorter cluster of runes.

Master: Changing Star.

As soon as he did, new runes ignited in the air.

…Rank: Dreamer.

Class: Devil.

Soul Cores: [4/7].

Soul Fragments: [399/4000].

Seven months ago, the gap between them had nearly reached five thousand fragments. Today, it was much smaller… but that was only thanks to the Noctis coins he had sacrificed to the altar. The truth of the matter was that Sunny had been slowly shortening the gap for a long time, but now, it had started growing once more.

Not too long ago, something had happened to Neph in the Dream Realm, and as the result, the speed with which she gained soul fragments began increasing with each day. Sunny didn't know what Changing Star was doing, why she had suddenly become so much stronger, and even how she was still alive… but he knew that he was being slowly left in the dust once again.

Dismissing the runes, he gritted his teeth and looked darkly at the desolate, hellish landscape of the Shipwreck Island.

'I have to get to that Seed… that is the only way…'

Compared to all other Awakened and their rate of growth, Sunny might have been a monster. But Neph… Neph was not even human.

She was the devil himself. He didn't know what else to do to surpass her.

To become stronger.

…His heavy thoughts were interrupted by the light sound of approaching steps. Looking up, Sunny saw Cassie walking over to him.

'Great. Just what I need…'

She stopped a couple of steps away and lowered her head slightly.

"Are you alright?"

Sunny grimaced, then looked away.

'What do you care?'

"I'll live."

He scowled, and then added in a slightly acrid tone:

"Your information was wrong, by the way. That thing was not weak to fire."

She tilted her head slightly.

"How did you kill it then?"

Sunny smiled crookedly.

"...With a piece of wood."

Cassie remained silent for a while, prompting him to speak:

"So… now what?"

She sighed and turned toward the distant wreck:

"All of us are tired and wounded, and there is a Crushing approaching. We will return to the Sanctuary to rest and regroup, and then come back to establish two camps — one here, and another

one on a neighboring island. Then, we will start repairing the ship."

He nodded.

"Good plan, I guess. Do you really think that you can make that thing fly again, though?"

The blind girl hesitated. Eventually, she said without too much emotion:

"We have to try, at least."

Sunny studied the silhouette of the ancient ship, its hull full of breaches, its bow shattered and broken, the tree growing around its mast dead and resembling a black, twisted skeleton. Then, he shook his head.

"How long do you think it will take you?"

Cassie hesitated.

"Two, maybe three months. We will be done before autumn is over, if that is what you want to know."

He chuckled.

"You remember our deal, then. Good."

She frowned.

"Of course, I remember."

Sunny looked at the ground, then asked her coldly:

"When are we leaving for the Night Temple, then?"

Cassie lingered for a few moments, a troubled expression suddenly finding its way onto her face. Finally, she said:

"When do you want to go?"

Sunny thought about it. There were several things he still needed to do…

After a while, he shrugged.

"End of September. Everything should be ready by then. The journey to the northern edge of the Chained Isles and back shouldn't take us longer than a month. We'll be back just in time to see your flying ship rise into the air. And use it to reach the Nightmare Seed."

He lingered for a second, and then asked:

"Why do you look so uneasy, though?"

Cassie slowly shook her head.

"It's nothing. Just, the Night Temple… it's a very strange place."

Sunny frowned.

'What is that supposed to mean?'

"How so?"

She shivered.

"I'll… explain it to you later. Right now, we need to move. This island is about to enter the ascent phase."

Which meant that the Crushing was not too far ahead, as well.

Sunny sighed, then stood up. He didn't have to limp anymore, at least.

As for why Cassie had said that the second human Citadel on the Chained Isles was a weird place… he could wait for the answer. He had no need for this information right now, anyway.

Sunny was a very patient man, at least when he needed to be. Besides, he had something else on his mind.

'Forty-two shadow fragments… it's not that much."

Looking south and slightly to the east, he gripped the shaft of the Cruel Sight and stared toward the horizon with a dark expression.

'...I'll be a demon before we're back to the Sanctuary.'

Chapter-525: Vengeful Ghosts

Six days later, the cohort had almost reached the safe haven of the Citadel. The speed with which they traveled reduced significantly due to the heavy wounds the Fire Keepers had sustained, so all things considered, it was a very good result.

As days went by, their healer had continued tending to his companions, so by now, most had already recovered — except for those like Shakti with especially grave injuries, of course. Those would only be healed after they had returned to the real world and then came back. Even then, their physical bodies were going to sustain serious internal damage and require a prolonged period of treatment.

As the sun disappeared in the Sky Below, the cohort reluctantly made camp. From where they were now, only a handful of islands separated them from the Sanctuary. However, some of those islands were populated by Nightmare Creatures too dangerous to attempt traversing their hunting grounds, so the Fire Keepers were going to have to make a big detour.

Since traveling in the darkness was a big risk, they had no choice but to spend another night in the wilderness and continue their journey tomorrow.

Sunny didn't mind.

When everyone fell asleep, he quietly turned into a shadow and slid unseen between the lookouts. The darkness of the night might have been a threat to them, but to him, it was an ally.

For Sunny, it was time to hunt.

He had been venturing alone into the deadly expanse of the Chained Isles for the past five nights, and this one was not an exception.

During that time, Sunny had taken more risks than he usually would, challenging Nightmare Creatures that he had studied before, and those that he knew almost nothing about. Hunting the latter ones was a deadly endeavor, but with Saint's help, he managed to emerge victorious from each battle without sustaining too many wounds.

The Undying Chain had also played a big part in his success, since even when Sunny received damage, it blocked most of it. Nothing had been able to pierce the bleak steel of his new armor yet.

…Gliding across the heavenly chain, Sunny approached a neighboring island and soared into the sky, then crashed heavily to the ground. The silver blade of the Cruel Sight gleamed, reflecting starlight as it manifested in his hand. Sunny rose to his feet and grunted, then walked forward with a dark expression.

The island he just reached was descending, but still high enough for him to feel the remnant effects of the Crushing. Still, Sunny didn't care. Tonight, nothing was going to stop him.

He was just one step away from fully saturating his cores.

Sunny walked between tall, jagged stones, approaching a large ruin that stood forlornly near the center of the island. He had been to this place and explored it before, so he knew what kind of abominations made their nest in the ancient structure.

The ruin might have been beautiful once, but now, it was warped and misshapen, its walls full of cracks and on the verge of collapsing. Sunny didn't know what purpose it had once served, and how it was destroyed, but had concluded many months ago that a terrible battle must have taken place inside the ruin once.

The clues were in the central hall of the shattered building, where the stones were damaged and looked like melted wax. Its walls had collapsed outward, which told him that whatever force had devastated the structure had come from within, as opposed to from the outside.

Regardless of any of that, he had fought the dwellers of the ruin before. There were two types of Nightmare Creatures inhabiting the

island of jagged rocks. The first ones were of the Awakened Rank, and resembled stone gargoyles. They had lived near the edges of the island, and Sunny had already killed most of them, if not all, during his first months on the Chained Isles.

The gargoyles never went near the ruin itself, because there were much more powerful creatures dwelling inside the ancient building. Those were of the Fallen Rank, and looked like beautiful specters. Beneath their eerie beauty, though, hid an ocean of madness, evil, and bloodlust. The first time Sunny had encountered these wraiths, he barely escaped alive.

Luckily, the wraiths only appeared at night.

...And now that he was much stronger and had the Cruel Sight, which had the ability to harm incorporeal enemies, this night was going to be their last.

Summoning his helmet, Sunny looked at the ruin through the narrow slits of his visor, and walked into the darkness that reigned between the ancient stone walls.

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[...Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny growled, jumping back from the ghostly form of a beautiful young woman he had just pierced with the incandescent blade of his spear. Or rather, she had seemed beautiful before showing her true face — a twisted, terrifying mask of inhuman hatred and corruption, ancient madness burning in the dark, bottomless pits of her eyes.

Fighting phantoms had turned out to be much harder than he had anticipated, even if the [Ghost Blade] enchantment of the Cruel Sight allowed him to strike them down. Not only because their movements were fast and unpredictable, defying the logic of combat he was familiar with, but also because their attacks seemed to be able to deal soul damage as well.

In fact, the claws of the wraiths of the ruin were able to bypass armor completely. The Undying Chain mitigated some damage due to its

higher Rank, but not enough to make the battle even remotely easy. Currently, Sunny felt weakened and in the throes of terrible pain, as if he had spent too much time in the vicinity of the Broken Oath.

'Curses…'

This just went to show that one could never feel safe in the Dream Realm. After receiving a Transcendent armor, Sunny had allowed himself to become too complacent. He should have known better than to forget that, no matter how powerful a person was, all it took to die was one mistake.

Every power had a flaw, after all.

But still, he wasn't going to retreat now.

As an ear-piercing scream echoed from the stone walls, growing closer and closer, Sunny gritted his teeth and summoned the runes.

Shadow Fragments: [1994/2000].

He raised the Cruel Sight and faced the direction of the eerie shriek with a grim smile.

'One more to go…'

Chapter-526: Demon

Before the wrathful specter had time to appear, Sunny attacked first.

Stepping through the shadows, he passed through the stone wall in front of him and entered a vast ruined hall. It was illuminated by the pale rays of moonlight that fell through the broken roof, but also full of deep darkness.

That darkness was cut by the bright radiance emanated by the incandescent blade of the Cruel Sight.

Jumping over a pile of rubble, Sunny brought his spear down on the howling wraith and then spun, sending an unexpected thrust in the direction where any enemy would have retreated.

Sadly, the apparition was suddenly somewhere else.

'Curses!'

The wraiths moved through space as if they were suspended between two worlds, as well as between the ground and the night sky. Their feet, if they had any, never touched the stone floor, and as such, Sunny couldn't observe their footwork to judge their next move.

What's worse, sometimes they simply disappeared and then appeared some distance away, as if phasing between different states of existence.

…It was a bit like fighting Sunny himself, when he used Shadow Step to zip around the battlefield.

'So annoying…'

Dashing forward, he barely avoided the ghostly claws and rolled over his shoulder on the floor. The steel of the Undying Chain scraped

against the shattered stones, producing a dull sound.

Considering how narrow the slits of the featureless mask that served as the visor of his helmet were, Sunny had a surprisingly wide and unobstructed field of view, almost as if he wasn't wearing any at all. Jumping back to his feet, he was finally able to take a good look at the hall he had entered.

'Ah, so that's where she was coming from.'

It was the central chamber of the ruin, where, as he suspected, a fierce confrontation had taken place in the ancient past. The stone slabs of the floor were cracked and misshapen, the pattern of destruction suggesting that something had detonated with tremendous force in the center of the hall once.

The pillars supporting the roof were long toppled, and the walls themselves had mostly collapsed. In the center of the room lay the remains of something resembling a massive stone chalice, now broken and almost unrecognizable.

…And there were human bones littering the floor.

Some skeletons were scattered entirely, and some were still whole. A few even wore the rotten remains of red silken garments that strongly resembled those of the deadly specters. Sunny had no doubt that these were the remains of people from whose souls the ghastly wraiths had been born.

He had no idea how they had died, why their souls had turned into vengeful specters instead of dissipating into the void, and what drove them to madly attack anyone who approached the ruins… all he knew was that the wraiths were very hard to destroy and full of seething hatred toward the living.

…Or maybe they just really hated him in particular, for whatever reason.

He grinned, and then brought his armored boot on one of the skulls, crushing it into dust. That caused the damnable specter to let out another chilling shriek and lunge at him with murderous fury, as if

she had lost all reason… if the creature had any reason, that is, to begin with.

Which was precisely what Sunny was hoping for.

His body, conditioned by the endless hours of practice with Effie and Saint, reacted almost on its own. Shifting his weight to his right foot, Sunny burst with motion and threw his hand up. The polished shaft of the Cruel Sight slid between his fingers, suddenly extending forward to its full length. He only caught it near the very end.

The reach of this strike was truly incredible, compared to how far a tachi like the Midnight Shard could effectively cut. The incandescent blade caught the wraith in the chest, sending tongues of white flame dancing on her spectral figure.

Divine flames could burn even souls, after all.

However, even engulfed in flames, the creature continued its attack. Since it was impossible to recover from performing such a strike quickly, Sunny would have been in trouble… luckily, the Cruel Sight was a very special weapon. Its shaft started shortening at the same speed as the wraith was advancing, continuing to burn it without a pause.

In the end, Sunny found himself face to face with the hateful apparition, gripping the hilt of a short sword. Without wasting any time, he pulled it upward, slicing through the incorporeal body of the enemy and reaching her neck.

White flames suddenly tore through the darkness of the creature's eyes, and before her ghostly claw could reach his flesh…

Just like that, the wraith was destroyed.

As her figure shimmered and started to disappear, Sunny let out a shaky breath, then summoned Saint from the shadows and threw the Cruel Sight to her.

"Guard me."

[You have slain a Fallen Demon, Chalice Maiden.]

The taciturn demon calmly caught the sword, weighted it in her hand, and then assumed her usual indifferent pose.

[Your shadow grows stronger...]

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Ah, this is going to suck.'

The voice of the Spell resounded once more, echoing in the darkness of the ruined hall:

[Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

He screamed and fell to his knees, feeling as though his very soul was on fire, as though something was rising from its dark depths, ripping it apart.

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

'D—da… damn it all! Why does it have to hurt so much?!

Sunny groaned and clawed at the floor, tears streaming from his eyes. The fingers of his armored gauntlet left deep grooves in the stone. The pain he was experiencing was not the worst he had ever felt, but really up there.

"Argh!"

He slammed his fist down, sending cracks through the slab of ancient stone, then did it again and again, pulverizing it into tiny shards.

Eventually, those shards turned into dust, and only then did his agony finally begin receding.

The Spell whispered into his ear:

[Your shadow is complete!]

Released from the paralyzing pain, Sunny fell down and sprawled on the floor. Breathing raggedly, he remained motionless for a few minutes, and then summoned the runes.

Familiar symbols shimmered in the air:

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Awakened.

Class: Demon.

Shadow Cores: [3/7].

Shadow Fragments: [0/3000].

Sunny smiled weakly.

After a while, he said:

"Back to zero, I guess..."

Chapter-527: The New Guy

Now that Sunny had experienced moving up a class without simultaneously rising to a new Rank, he understood the difference between the two more clearly.

Ascending to a new Rank was a much more profound change. It elevated the quality of his shadow cores and essence, gifted him with new abilities, and allowed for a deeper access to his Aspect. The resulting jump in power was nothing short of tremendous.

Reaching a new Class, on the contrary, primarily affected the quantity of his shadow essence, and as such, the increase in power was much more gradual. Sunny didn't feel much stronger than he had a few hours ago… but that was because he had already been enjoying the extra strength and essence capacity for a long time.

In fact, the main benefit of having several cores had been aiding him ever since Sunny passed the one-thousand mark on the counter of shadow fragments. Unlike all other Awakened — excluding Nephis — there was no limit to his capacity to store essence and reinforce his body. Or rather, that limit was so high that it might have as well not been there.

…However, that was not to say that Sunny didn't get other, incredibly potent benefits from manifesting a third shadow core.

Standing up with a groan, he allowed the moonlight to bathe his slender figure and looked down, at the three dark silhouettes sprawled on the ancient stones in front of him.

One shadow looked like it was suffering from a toothache, the other was beyond itself and jubilant, and the third one…

'Uh…'

The third shadow was just standing there motionlessly and staring at him, its dark figure not betraying any hint of emotion. Under its silent and unnerving gaze, he suddenly felt a bit uncomfortable.

For some reason, Sunny shivered slightly.

'Is it just me, or is this guy a bit… uh… creepy?'

The creepy shadow didn't react at all to this thoughts and just continued staring at him without moving.

Sunny hesitated, then cleared his throat.

"Uh, well… welcome to the team. Meet the other two, your elder siblings."

The new shadow lingered for a few moments, and then slowly turned its head to look at his other ones.

Immediately, the happy shadow made an energetic move to welcome it, but then stumbled midstep, shivered a little, and slowly backed away, somehow ending up hiding behind the gloomy one.

The gloomy shadow sighed with contempt, then faced the new guy and glared at him, clearly unimpressed. Amused, Sunny watched the two stare at each for several minutes straight.

In the end, the creepy shadow glanced at him, then silently walked over to one of the ancient skeletons and studied the skull with disturbing fascination.

…It was trying to act cool, but Sunny could tell that the new guy was a bit flustered.

He smiled.

'That's right… that gloomy one is a real menace! Even I am afraid of him, a little!'

The gloomy shadow looked at both of them with disdain, shook its head, and indifferently turned away.

Sunny chuckled.

'Alright… time to experiment a little.'

After that, he summoned all three shadows and wrapped them around his body. Immediately, he felt explosive might course through his veins, his skin turning hard as stone, his speed increasing tremendously. It was as though he grew four times more powerful than he had been a couple of seconds ago.

A dark grin found its way onto his face.

'So that is how it feels to be a demon…'

Sunny dashed to the wall of the vast chamber, then ran back, raising a gale of wind in his wake. Then, he brought his fist down on a piece of rubble, making it explode into a cloud of shards. Finally, he saturated his muscles with essence and jumped up, easily flying a dozen meters into the air and climbing onto the roof of the ruin through the breach in the dome of its central hall.

His heart was beating fast in triumphant exhilaration.

"Incredible! This is amazing!"

Sitting down, he glanced at Saint, who was far below him now, and laughed.

Sunny was more powerful now than any Awakened was supposed to be. In fact, in terms of pure physical ability, he was much closer to Masters, perhaps even at the same level as those of them who had just reached their Rank and had no time to reinforce their cores yet.

That was not to say that he had a good chance of prevailing in a fight against an Ascended. Physical ability was not what made them so deadly, after all. Remembering the ease with which Master Jet had severed the arm of a Fallen Tyrant, Sunny sighed wistfully.

What's more, he now had the ability to augment three things at the same time. If Saint wasn't with him, Sunny could enhance his body, his armor, and his weapon simultaneously. Depending on the situation, he could also stack augmentations either on the Cruel Sight

or the Undying Chain, which gave him much more choices during a battle with especially tough or dangerous opponents.

And there was one other thing…

Sunny summoned the runes and glanced at a particular string:

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Dormant.

Shadow Class: Demon.

'Aha! Just as I thought.'

Before, the Soul Serpent was a mere Monster. Sunny had long thought that the Shadow's Rank depended on the level of Shadow Dance comprehension he was able to achieve, while its Class depended on his own. Now, he had proof.

Looking down, Sunny noticed new runes shimmering in the darkness.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon].

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel].

The Ability was new. Excited, he read its description:

[Serpentine Steel] Ability Description: "Shadow Serpent's Soul Weapon form can assume the shape of any weapon."

A crooked smile appeared on his face.

Commanding the Serpent to slither forth and assume the shape of the dark odachi, he studied the great sword for a few moments, and then gave another command. The lusterless blade suddenly flowed like black mercury, and a few moments later, he was holding a long spear in his hand.

Almost unseen on the dark wood, the scales of a long coiling body were engraved on its shaft, the spearhead shaped to resemble that of a serpent.

Sunny drew in a deep breath.

'This is perfect. This is just what I needed…'

Dismissing the predatory spear and allowing the Shadow to slither back onto his body, he looked east, where a pale lilac line had already appeared over the horizon, and smiled.

"...I should be getting back."

The new day was coming, and Sunny couldn't wait to return to the real world.

With only a few months left until it was time to challenge the Seed of Nightmare, he had a lot of things to do…

Chapter-528: Personal Style

A few days later, Sunny was in his living room, watching as Rain performed the same strike over and over again, her eyes full of stubborn determination. The practice sword rose and fell, over and over again, cutting the air with a whistling sound.

…Actually, her form wasn't bad.

Effie was currently traveling between Citadels, so she had not come out of her sleeping pod for a while now. Sunny and Rain were alone, which made the training session much less lively.

'Finally, some peace and quiet…'

Despite thinking that, Sunny couldn't help but feel that his home seemed a little bit empty these days.

He sighed.

There were other things on his mind, too.

Now that his part of the deal with Cassie was complete, the journey into the Nightmare was drawing close. No matter how aloof about the whole thing Sunny wanted to remain, he was aware that there was a real possibility that he would not return from that trial alive. Even if he did, there was no telling how long conquering the Nightmare would take.

Which meant that his remaining time with Rain was limited, and he couldn't waste it.

He had to accelerate her training and teach her some actual battle skills.

Observing the teenage girl, who continued to swing her practice

sword while drops of sweat rolled down her face, Sunny was in deep thought.

What style was he going to teach her?

Rain was his sister, so his first instinct was to share his legacy, Shadow Dance, with her. Almost as if they were members of an actual clan...

However, that wasn't a very good idea.

Not only was her mentality poorly suited for his shapeless and insidious battle art, but she was also physically incapable of learning it.

Since everyone received extensive combat training in school, there weren't really a lot of weak people in the waking world. But Shadow Dance was simply not meant to be practiced by mundane humans. It demanded a physical constitution of an Awakened, at least.

Sunny was only able to master the first step as a Sleeper because of his unique Aspect, hundreds upon hundreds of shadow fragments he had absorbed on the Forgotten Shore, and the fact that this style was tailor-made for him, by him.

What, then?

The flowing and unpredictable battle art that Nephis had taught him obviously came to mind. It was designed to be a perfect foundational style, after all. However, Sunny didn't like the idea of teaching it to Rain. Not only because he felt that he didn't have the right, but also because it came from the Immortal Flame clan.

Sunny suspected that this ingeniously adaptable battle art had been created by the martial genius, Broken Sword himself. He also had an idea of who Broken Sword's killers were. Who could tell what problems knowing this style could drag along?

By now, Sunny had also learned a plethora of various battle styles in the Dreamscape. However, none of them impressed him too much.

That meant that there was only one choice left. Coincidentally, he felt

that it was the most fitting.

Saint's solid, grounded battle style.

It seemed to suit Rain's quiet, thoughtful, and meticulous personality very well. It was also the most precise and methodical technique Sunny knew, and one that provided the best defense. His goal was to ensure that Rain survives for as long as possible, and having a flawless defense went a long way if one wanted to not die.

More than that, his sister seemed to share a connection with Saint. If she was such a big fan of the graceful demon, perhaps there was a reason for that. In any case, learning the style of her idol would not be the worst thing in the world.

…Noticing that he was staring at her with a dark expression, Rain stopped and gave Sunny a questioning look.

"...What? Did I mess up?"

He slowly shook his head.

"No. Actually, your form was perfect for the last hundred strikes."

A wide, incredibly bright smile suddenly appeared on the teenage girl's usually calm and collected face.

"Aha! See! I practiced every day while you were gone on your trip. All my classmates think that I lost my mind. What do those fools even know!"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

'...Since when does she refer to people as fools? She was such a polite girl before… uh… before meeting me?'

Rain blinked a couple of times, then asked:

"But if I was doing it right, why were you staring at me with that "curses and damnation" expression of yours?"

'A what now?! I don't have a…'

Sunny cleared his throat.

"That… uh… I think that you're ready to learn more than one strike."

Rain beamed.

"Yes! Finally!"

She looked around the living room, and then said:

"So, are you going to show me some real battle techniques? Effie said that you are decent with the sword. At least I think that was what she meant. Are you?"

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged and stood up.

"Yeah. I do know my way around a sword. Let me just… actually, this place is too cramped. Follow me."

Turning around, he went toward the hallway and pressed on a certain wall panel, which then moved aside, revealing the doors of an elevator.

Rain stared at all that with a funny expression.

"Uh… you have a secret door in your house?"

Sunny smiled.

"Sure. Actually, I have two. One for the stairs, and one for the elevator."

The girl thought for a second, and then gave him an understanding nod.

"Ah. You have an underground shelter. That's smart… we don't have one in our home, since building it is very expensive."

He gave her a strange look.

"Aren't your parents rich?"

Rain laughed.

"For a wildly successful young entrepreneur, you don't know a lot about money, do you, Sunny? Sure, our family is not poor. But there's rich… and then there's rich. And we're not that kind of rich."

Sunny tilted his head, trying to make sense of what he had just heard.

'What the hell is that nonsense? Rich is rich… isn't it?'

He frowned.

"I know lots about money, kid! I know to make it, and how to spend it. What else is there to know?"

Rain stared at him for a few moments, and then silently shook her head.

Together, they entered the elevator and descended into the underground dojo.

Chapter-529: Secret Lair

The dojo was rather large and submerged in absolute darkness. Sunny gave the home a command, and immediately, bright light chased the darkness away, revealing the floor, walls, and ceiling that were covered by heavy plates of armored ceramic alloy.

Some of the plates already had cracks in them, which Sunny was painfully aware of… after all, those cracks had appeared as the result of Saint repeatedly slamming him against the floor. Simply looking at them made Sunny ache all over.

'I'm going to have to replace a few soon…'

He exited the elevator and walked over to a stand where various practice weapons were kept. These weapons were made out of reinforced synthetic materials to withstand the intensity of Awakened training, and had cost him a fortune. Sadly, Sunny had never even touched them, since training with the real deal was far more effective.

'Hm…'

Behind him, Rain walked into the dojo and looked around with curiosity. This space looked dark and mysterious, like a lair of a mythical monster.

"Do you come here a lot?"

Sunny gave her a short look.

"Of course, I do. This is where I sleep."

She was slightly surprised, but then seemed to understand the meaning of his answer.

For mundane humans, such a shelter would only be useful if a Gate opened nearby. But Awakened were more or less defenseless while in the Dream Realm. They needed the protection an underground bunker could provide much more, since their empty bodies could be easily destroyed when the spirit wandered away.

Her gaze traveled to the steel sarcophagus of the sleeping pod, and then moved past it. Suddenly, Rain's eyes brightened.

"Wow! Is that a Dreamscape pod?"

Sunny hesitated, surprised by her strong reaction.

"Uh… sure. Why?"

'My super expensive sleeping pod is much more impressive! Why is she so fascinated by that silly thing?'

The teenage girl walked over to the alcove with the two machines and studied one of them with excited curiosity. The luxurious, state-of-the-art sarcophagus received zero attention.

"Do you play often?"

He rolled his eyes, then shrugged.

"From time to time, I guess? When I have time. Dueling other Awakened helps with my own training."

Rain sighed with envy.

"That's cool. Some of my classmates have personal Dreamscape pods, too. They play the version for mundane humans, of course, but it still sounds amazing."

Sunny smiled.

"What, do you want to play?"

Rain looked at the pod for a few moments, then slowly shook her head. When she spoke, her voice sounded too mature for her age:

"No… not really. It's only fun with friends."

He frowned a little, then asked in a neutral tone:

"Why, don't you have any friends?"

The teenage girl sighed, then turned away from the capsule.

"No. I used to have a lot in my previous school, but after dad got me a spot in this one… uh, I just study and go home. People there are not... very friendly."

'That's one way to put it…'

Sunny looked at her, then smiled widely.

"Well, friends are overrated anyway! I never had any growing up, and look at me. Have I not turned out just fine?"

She did look at him, doubt clearly written on her face.

"Yeah… but…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"But what?"

Rain lingered for a few moments, then asked curiously:

"Don't you have a girlfriend?"

Sunny blinked.

'Huh?'

"Wait… what? What girlfriend? Don't tell me that you think that Effie and I…"

Rain giggled.

"Actually, I did think that at the start. So I asked Effie, and she told me that you already have a girlfriend."

Sunny's eye twitched.

'Damn Effie! I'm really going to kill her… better yet, I'll make Saint kill her! How many times will she repeat that stupid joke about us before realizing that it isn't funny? It wasn't funny the first time, and it's certainly not funny the hundredth!'

…He opened his mouth to retort angrily. However, Rain's next word made him fall silent.

"She said that you bring her flowers every week, and even visit her mom from time to time. I think it's very sweet."

Sunny froze, staring at the teenage girl with a heavy expression. Feeling that his reaction was a bit strange, Rain frowned.

"Uh… did I say something wrong?"

He lingered for a few moments, then turned away.

"No. Effie just likes to run her mouth sometimes. She shouldn't have told you that."

Not quite understanding what was happening, but feeling dark undertones in his voice, the teenage girl awkwardly smiled.

"Oh, did I just get Effie in trouble?"

Staring at the practice weapons, Sunny sighed.

"...No. It's just that… there is indeed a girl I bring flowers to when I can. But she isn't my girlfriend."

Rain glanced at him in confusion.

"But… uh… why do you bring her flowers, then?"

Sunny turned around and looked at her darkly. Rain suddenly shivered, realizing that she had never seen Sunny acting this… cold.

A few moments later, he said evenly:

"It's because I made it out of the Dream Realm, and she did not. Do

you understand?"

The teenage girl thought for a few moments, then paled a little, and nodded.

Sunny shook his head.

"I don't think you do. And hopefully, you never will."

With that, he took a round shield and a straight practice sword off the wall, closed his eyes for a moment, and then forced an easygoing smile to appear on his face.

"...Anyway, here's what you'll be training with from now on. They might be a bit heavy for you, but the weight will help you condition your body. What do you think?"

Still feeling a bit awkward, Rain took the weapons, weighed them in her hands, and cleared her throat.

"Uh… actually, I prefer ranged weapons. That's what I've been mostly using in school."

Sunny shook his head.

"Ranged weapons are wonderful, and you should definitely know how to use them. But they stop being wonderful as soon as a Nightmare Creature gets close to you, and believe me, they will. So you should learn melee combat first."

Rain looked at him with a bit of stubbornness.

"But Night from Nightingale is an archer, and he is a hero who has a True Name."

'Oh, gods… don't tell me that my little sister is his fangirl, too! Damned Kai... just you wait...'

Sunny stared at the teenage girl for a few moments, his expression unreadable. After a while, he said in a strange tone:

"Night from Nightingale can fly. Can you? In any case, learn how to

use a sword first. If you do, I'll get him to personally teach you how to shoot a bow. How about that?"

Rain laughed.

"Yeah… sure! Why don't you invite him for dinner as well, while you're at it?"

After that, she covered her mouth with a palm and laughed even louder.

Sunny sighed heavily, then shook his head.

'This child… she's hopeless, isn't she?'

He waited until Rain stopped laughing, and then said sternly:

"Before we start, though, I am going to ask you a question."

She looked at him, turning back into her serious, studious self.

"Yeah?"

Sunny lingered for a few moments, and then asked:

"...What do you think the essence of combat is?"

Chapter-530: Something Better

Rain looked at him with a serious expression, thinking.

Inwardly, Sunny sighed.

He still didn't know how to change her mentality and make her vicious enough to survive the Dream Realm. He didn't even know if he wanted to, and if that was the right thing to do.

At least she seemed to understand a little bit more about the truth of the world after surviving the Gate opening. For now, that was going to have to be enough.

And this conversation was his attempt to make the lesson stick.

After a while, Rain said with uncertainty:

"Survival?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, looking at her with surprise.

What were the chances that, despite their different life experiences, his sister would answer the question the same way he had, all that time ago, in the desolate hell of the Forgotten Shore?

He remained silent for a while, remembering those terrible, wonderful days. Then, he shook his head.

"No. The essence of combat is murder."

Rain shivered slightly.

"M—murder?"

Sunny nodded.

"Of course. What else would it be? You have to kill your enemy, or die. Either way, someone ends up murdered, and someone ends up as the murderer. So, the purpose of combat training is to make sure that you're the murderer. It is really that simple."

He paused, and then added:

"Survival is important, of course… but that can't be your primary goal. Such a goal is a terrible one to have. Even in life, it is not enough. You have to survive to continue living, but if you only live to survive, then what is even the point? More than that, if you don't strive for something bigger, something better, then you will only ever do what is required and nothing else.

Which will make you weaker than those who want and dare to do more, and that weakness will cost you your life…"

His voice trailed off, and Sunny suddenly fell silent. Rain looked at him in confusion.

"Uh… Sunny?"

He blinked a couple of times.

"Yeah. Sorry. So…"

'Well, what do you know? I guess it's true what they say, the best way to learn is to teach…'

While trying to impart some wisdom, little as he had, on his attentive student, Sunny had accidentally stumbled on a truth about his own desperate desire to grow stronger. Everything Sunny had told Rain could be applied to himself. He had long ago abandoned his singular desire to survive at all cost, and now wanted much more.

But was his desire to live free and with dignity really comparable to Neph's passionate, immolating obsession? Would he really be able to surpass her while being driven by such a mundane goal?

That… gave Sunny a lot to think about.

He glanced at Rain, and then continued:

"...Mastery of combat can be divided into two aspects. Mastery of the body, and mastery of the mind. Your body can be trained through exercise, but your mind… is much more tricky. If you can understand the true essence of combat, however — truly grasp it with your very core — then you will have enough clarity to master the mind…"

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Sunny spent some time explaining the fundamental laws of combat — at least to the extent that he himself understood them — to Rain. In the end, he wasn't sure that she really grasped the knowledge he wanted to share with her, but it was at least a start.

Thinking back to his own tumultuous education, Sunny couldn't really blame her. It was hard, or maybe even impossible, to really understand battle without experiencing it. He had met Nephis after surviving the First Nightmare and several days of fighting for his life on the Forgotten Shore. Even then, it had taken being nearly killed by a carapace centurion for him to reach the state of clarity.

There were no carapace centurions around, and Sunny certainly wasn't going to run her through with a sword.

So, for now, this was going to have to do.

After the verbal lesson, Sunny showed Rain a few basic stances and katas of Saint's style, and watched her struggle to replicate them. The progress was slow, but she was really a talented kid. For now, what held her back the most was her weak body.

But that was okay. One couldn't expect a teenage girl to be as strong as an Awakened. Her body could be trained… of course, Rain was never going to be as strong and resilient as a burly, able-bodied man.

But then, neither was Sunny. Due to his low stature and lean build, he couldn't compete with people like Caster or Master Roan in terms of physical might. However, this could be mitigated by Aspect Abilities, absorbing fragments, and mastering precise essence control.

What's more, sharp weapons were the great equalizer. The purpose of a weapon was to reduce the amount of force one needed to apply to

deliver a lethal blow. Unless one planned to beat their enemy to death with their fists, technique and skill were much more important than pure strength.

And Saint's battle style could make that inherent disadvantage even slimmer.

…After a while, Sunny judged that Rain had had enough. The girl seemed to be sufficiently exhausted, and pushing further would not do her any good. He gestured for her to stop and placed the practice weapons back on the stand, then summoned the Endless Spring and offered it to the tired girl.

Rain was breathing heavily, her pale face glistening with sweat. Noticing the beautiful glass bottle, she smiled with excitement.

"Wow! Is that a Memory?"

Sunny tilted his head a little.

"Sure… why are you asking?"

The girl grabbed the Endless Spring and studied it from all sides, then cautiously took a few sips.

"You don't get it! I've never seen a real Memory up close before. It… it feels so real!"

He stared at her in bewilderment.

"It is real. What are you talking about?"

Rain glanced at him with scorn, drank the water greedily, and then handed the Endless Spring back with a bit of reluctance.

"Did you get it after defeating some terrible monster? Or bought it?"

Sunny frowned, hesitated for a moment, and then said darkly:

"...It was a gift, actually."

She blinked a couple of times.

"Oh. From… from that friend of yours?"

He grimaced.

"No. Not from a friend."

Then, Sunny dismissed the Endless Spring and headed toward the elevator.

"Anyway, it's time for you to go. Otherwise, your parents might think that I have kidnapped you. Oh…"

He thought for a bit before saying:

"I, uh… I have some ice cream in the fridge. We can eat it before you go. If you want. Unless Effie has already devoured everything, of course."

Rain giggled, then followed him with a very pleased expression.

Before entering the elevator, she threw one last glance at the Dreamscape pod, and then suddenly asked:

"By the way, the Dream Tournament is in a few days. Are you participating?"

Sunny scoffed and pressed the button, sending the elevator up.

"Do I look like I have time to play with kids in a playground? I have real things to do, you know!"

Rain glanced at him, and sighed.

"Yeah, I get it. What a pity, though. I hear that the main prize this year is especially amazing. You wouldn't be able to win it, of course, but there are many smaller rewards."

Sunny's expression subtly changed.

As the doors opened, he looked at Rain, remained silent for a moment, and then asked in a very, very disinterested voice:

"Oh, really? There are prizes? Huh, how curious. What, uh… what

kind of prizes are we talking about, exactly?"

Chapter-531: Dream Tournament

Some time later, Sunny saw Rain out, watched as she walked away, and then calmly closed the door.

As soon as she did, however, his placid expression evaporated.

"What the hell! How come I didn't know about this?!"

Hastily taking out his communicator, he accessed the network and searched for information about the Dream Tournament.

A few minutes later, he sat down on a chair, a little stunned.

"What is this insanity?!"

Sunny knew, of course, that Dreamscape duels were a popular form of entertainment — both among the Awakened, who participated in them, and among the mundane humans, who followed their favorite duelists and created boisterous fan clubs.

However, he had no idea that even the Great Clans paid attention to the illusory game.

Apparently, the creator of the Dreamscape held a big tournament each year, and each year, one of the Great Clans — either Valor, Song, or Night — sponsored the prize pool. Participants who managed to achieve good results were able to receive cash prizes, Memories, and even Echoes.

The rewards for the finalists were especially generous, and came directly from the Great Clan's armory. They were also of the Ascended Rank.

Sunny trembled, his eyes burning with avarice.

'No, no… think about it rationally…'

The Great Clans were obviously after a straightforward goal — keep an eye on the rising talents among the unaffiliated Awakened. But did it matter? Sunny had already failed to keep his fake persona under the radar. Anyone who paid attention to Dreamscape had at least heard about Mongrel.

What was there to even think about?

'Free goodies! That's what it is!'

Completely forgetting about his previous disdain for the tournament, Sunny got completely absorbed by the prospect of receiving Memories free of charge. He was almost drooling.

And if free Memories weren't enough, there was another reason for why this tournament now seemed very alluring to him.

For the past months, Sunny had participated in hundreds of duels in various arenas. His goal was to absorb as many styles as possible, to reinforce the foundation of Shadow Dance and make it more efficient. This way, he hoped to achieve the next level of mastery over his elusive battle art.

Not all battle styles were made the same. Some were simple and straightforward, while others were complex and unique. The more unique a style was, the harder it was for Sunny to gain insight into its principles.

It was not like he had a magical ability to peer into the very essence of a style… this ability of his was more or less mundane, based on his own talent, mastery, and sensitivity to shadows.

So, he had been working diligently to create a sizable library of simpler styles, which would in turn improve his capacity to discern the patterns of more complicated ones with sufficient speed. After all, all styles were constructed out of the same basic elements. The more basic patterns he knew, the easier it was to understand various styles on the fly.

However, the quality of his opponents in the Dreamscape arenas was not that high… for obvious reasons. True talents had better things to do than play games. Most of them also belonged to Legacy clans, who lived by a different set of rules.

In the world of Legacies, strength and talent were not something to boast about. Renown only served to make the enemy aware of your weaknesses. In that regard, hidden tigers of the Legacy clans were very much like Sunny, remaining in the shadows until it was time to deliver a lethal strike.

That was why his progress had stalled lately. These days, the only worthy opponents he could find were a few rare eccentrics and a rare gem here and there, not nearly enough to satiate Mongrel's hunger for a variety of distinct battle styles.

What's more, at the highest levels of Awakened battle skill, styles were not only about physical movements and mindset anymore. They weaved unique patterns of essence control into the technique, too, which Sunny couldn't perceive and was only able to infer from indirect clues. Sadly, he wasn't exposed to a lot of opponents practicing such styles in the arenas.

…The tournament was going to change that, however. With the valuable prizes added into the mix, people who would usually not waste time in the Dreamscape were bound to show up, lured by the scent of rare Memories and Echoes. Even people from lesser Legacy clans would, without a doubt, be tempted to participate.

A powerful Ascended weapon or armor could change their lives, too.

So, Sunny could kill two birds with one stone. Compete for these prizes and enrich his library of styles at the same time.

'Forget it! I'd be a fool to miss this chance…'

Even knowing what a headache it would be to bring even more exposure to Mongrel, Sunny couldn't let such an opportunity go. Plus, he had some free time while Effie and Kai were traveling to the Chained Isles.

Scrolling through the feed, he started reading everything he could find about the upcoming tournament.

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Several days later, Sunny locked the door of his house, descended into the basement, and approached the Dreamscape pod.

As soon as he entered the fake black void, the familiar pleasant voice greeted him:

"Welcome back to the Dreamscape, Challenger Mongrel!"

Sunny didn't pay attention to it and briefly looked at his status.

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 813"

"Defeats: 0"

With a quiet sneer, he turned to several images floating in the boundless darkness in front of him.

These were the arenas he had access to, and by now, there were significantly more of them than had been there at the start. Today, however, the list looked different.

The images of the arenas were pushed to the sides, and a new one appeared in the very middle. It was completely white, with a golden shape of an olive wreath depicted beneath two shining words:

"Dream Tournament"

Sunny lingered for a moment, summoned the Mantle of the Underworld and Weaver's Mask, and then stepped toward the image.

Chapter-532: Ancient Forest

The golden wreath disappeared, and Sunny found himself facing two new images. On one, a knight in a suit of polished armor was depicted holding a bloodied sword. On the other, a warrior in an archaic armor was shown standing back to back with the knight, a slender huntress drawing her bow behind them.

The pleasant voice announced:

"Challenger, select your dream."

Several words appeared above the images.

"Dream of Glory", "Dream of Camaraderie".

'What's with the bells and whistles…'

Sunny rolled his eyes.

The choice was very simple — one image was going to send him into the individual competition, while the other was meant for cohorts.

The Dream Tournament was basically two separate tournaments happening at the same time. This way, those Awakened who didn't have combat Aspects could also participate and earn rewards. It was a good system.

Sunny had no intention of searching for a cohort, so he simply chose the image of the lonely knight and closed his eyes.

Unlike the usual Dreamscape duels, the tournament included various battle modes. They were also broadcasted and happened on a schedule, so he had to wait for the first qualifier round to start.

Standing in the darkness, Sunny couldn't help but feel a little excited.

***

"Challenger! Draw your weapon and prepare! Only the best will survive!"

A bright light suddenly shone from above, and he found himself in the middle of a lush forest. All around him, ancient trees swayed lightly, their leaves rustling in the gentle wind.

Some distance away, a tranquil lake glistened in the sunlight, and from its clear waters, a breathtakingly beautiful castle rose into the sky. The castle was built out of grey stone and was as large as a city, its ancient walls scarred by a thousand sieges that it had withstood. Still, those scars could not diminish the ethereal beauty of the great fortress.

The arena was vast, and encompassed all of the forest. There was no other Awakened near Sunny, and for a good reason.

The qualifying rounds of the Dream Tournament were held in the form of a grand battle royale. A thousand challengers were sent into a large environment, and only the last one standing would be allowed to move on.

Depending on their performance, a few more people could also gain entry into the tournament… but the only concrete method to qualify was to be the sole survivor. This was a necessary measure implemented in the last few years because of the sheer amount of participants.

Arranging and broadcasting so many individual duels was not very practical… or profitable… especially considering that most of these Awakened were not very skilled. The battle royale was meant to weed out the weak and create an exciting show for the viewers.

Sunny knew this, of course, because he had done some research in the past couple of days.

…He didn't need the research to recognize where he was, though.

'Wow… it's even more beautiful in real life…'

Who didn't know Bastion?

This year, clan Valor sponsored the tournament, so the arena was designed to resemble the seat of their power, great Bastion — one of the three most populous human Citadels in the Dream Realm.

Sunny had never been to the ancient castle, but its image was ubiquitous in popular culture. He recognized it instantly.

'So… this must be the Lake of Bones, then.'

And all around him was the ancient, cursed forest that Anvil of Valor had destroyed.

These days, of course, the landscape surrounding Bastion was very different. Instead of a lush forest, it was surrounded by a sea of ash and charred remains of the dreaded titan, with human forts built here and there to repel powerful Nightmare Creatures from wandering close to the Citadel.

But thanks to the Dreamscape, Sunny got to enjoy the way this place had looked before, vibrant and pristine. The only difference was that there was no harrowing darkness hiding behind the veil of false tranquility.

'Ah. How nice.'

Compared to the Chained Isles, it was a nice change of pace.

Just as he thought that, the voice of the Dreamscape suddenly announced:

"Challenger Mongrel #19 was eliminated."

Sunny tilted his head.

'Well, that was fast. Also… what's up with that alias?"

Shaking his head, he commanded the Soul Serpent to assume the form of the odachi and calmly headed deeper into the forest.

It was time to start hunting...

***

On the official broadcast channel, the image of an eliminated player was shown briefly. Then, a rather lighthearted voice spoke:

"What a kill! Just a few seconds after the start, and we already have a casualty. Let's all wish Mongrel #19 better luck next year!"

An avatar of an exquisitely handsome young man appeared in the corner of the broadcast. Glancing at the camera with a bright smile, he continued:

"And so, the fifth annual Dream Tournament has begun! Yes, it's me, Syclus. Your favorite commentator and Nightmare Creature expert! Hold the applause, he-he. Guys, I have a big surprise for you. Guess who decided to join me in the commentator booth today?"

The young man paused, and then gestured to the other side of the screen, where an older man with sharp features, deep eyes, and a short beard appeared.

"That's right, you're not hallucinating! It's Dimi, the great loremaster and former Dream Champion! Give him a warm welcome!"

As a deluge of messages flooded the chat, the older man smiled.

"Hey, everyone."

Syclus, meanwhile, spoke again:

"We have a couple of minutes before the real action starts, since challengers need some time to find each other in this beautiful arena. So, while we wait, I have a couple of questions for Dimi."

He glanced at the broadcast, which switched between various Awakened traveling through the forest. Some of them were well-equipped and looked skilled, while others less so.

"First of all, this year we had a record number of fighters signing up for the tournament. What are your thoughts on that as a veteran Dreamscape duelist, Dimi?"

The older man smiled.

"It's nice to see more Awakened taking up the illusory sword. Some of them might even know how to use one! Of course, I have to give a lot of credit to the generosity of the Great Clan Valor. They have really outdone themselves with the prizes this year. No, I am not salty. Not at all!"

Syclus laughed, and then threw a mischievous glance at his colleague.

"Alright, then I'll ask you the question that I am sure is on everyone's mind. As an expert, who do you think will win the tournament... and why is it Mongrel?"

Chapter-533: Battle Royale

As soon as the commentator mentioned Mongrel, the feed changed to the image of a menacing figure in black armor calmly walking through the forest, the blade of the infamous odachi resting on its shoulder. The lightless pits of the demonic mask's eyes stared directly into the camera, as if there was nothing but darkness beneath it.

As soon as Mongrel appeared on the screens, the chat exploded.

"YES! It's Mongrel!"

"Hail to the Lord!"

"Huh? Who is Mongrel?"

"...You mean hail to the LADY?"

Dimi laughed.

"Ah, yes. This guy. Well, Mongrel is a really impressive fighter, but the results may not be as predictable as everyone thinks. Every year, the same thing happens — at the later stages of the tournament, two distinct groups clash. One is the Dreamscape elites, and the other is newcomers attracted by the rewards. Historically, the newcomers tend to do better."

He sighed and shook his head.

"Plus, we don't really know a lot about Mongrel. Sure, he has a very impressive track record, but most of his wins were achieved against random opponents. Who knows what will happen when he faces the best of the best? If I were to bet, my money is still on Queen Bee. If anyone has a chance against the newcomers, it should be her."

Syclus nodded a few times, expressing his enthusiastic agreement.

"Sure! But, still, returning to Mongrel. Everyone is dying to know who he really is under that scary mask. And if anyone knows anything about you, Dimi, they'll know that you must have your guesses…"

The older man smiled, his eyes suddenly gleaming with excitement.

"Funny you should ask! Actually, I do have a theory…"

***

"Challenger Lord Corvus was eliminated."

"Challenger Fry was eliminated."

"Challenger Erax was eliminated."

Sunny stared at the three corpses at his feet, which were already turning into a flood of white sparks. These three Awakened attacked him as a group, and while their skill was not bad and even admirable, he had no problem dispatching the trio in the span of a minute.

The fact that they had managed to remain alive for more than several seconds was already an excellent result, considering who their enemy was.

Flourishing the odachi in the air, Sunny shook the drops of blood off its blade and continued walking.

...Technically, he didn't have to clean his blade, since the blood was bound to turn into sparks of light and disappear, too. But that was already a habit of his... not to mention being extremely cool.

Truth be told, that short skirmish was not as easy as he had made it look. The Awakened were dangerous enemies, since each of them possessed a unique Aspect. They were cunning, resourceful, and unpredictable. That was why he had to act swiftly, making the fight appear much more brutal than it should have been.

Currently, Sunny wasn't using any of his shadows to augment himself. He had decided against it a long time ago, since being able to crush his opponents with brute force was detrimental to his main goal —

polishing his battle technique and learning various styles.

So, the gloomy shadow was currently behaving like any normal shadow would, while the other two were wrapped around the Autumn Leaf — the Memory he used to change the color of his hair. Since it had no other purpose, the augmentation did not give him any advantage.

…His hair must have looked gorgeous, though.

Snickering under the mask, Sunny jogged forward. He was in a rush to eliminate as many other players as he could before the first leaderboard announcement was made.

Meeting the group of three allied Awakened reminded him of the inherent problem with the battle royale format of the qualifying rounds — as soon as true powerhouses revealed themselves, weaker participants were bound to band together and start hunting them down.

Very soon, there could be a dozen fighters launching a coordinated attack on him, or even more.

Sunny was confident of his skill, but not to that degree. Even for a battle-hardened veteran like him, someone who had spent hundreds of days fighting for his life in the darkest depths of the Dream Realm, such a fight would not be easy.

'This battle royale is going to be much more intense than I had expected…'

Before Sunny could finish this thought, an ancient tree next to him suddenly exploded into a cloud of splinters, and something sharp shot at him with incredible speed. Cursing, he dashed to the side and barely dodged out of the way.

The next moment, a giant arrow whistled past him and embedded itself into the trunk of another tree, its trembling shaft as long as he was tall.

Sunny rolled over his shoulder and glanced at the arrow, then lunged into a sprint.

'Curses! A sniper!'

A second later, another giant arrow fell from the sky, almost skewering him to the ground.

Sunny gritted his teeth and continued running.

***

On the countless screens, an image of a broad-shouldered young man was shown, drawing the string of an oversized bow. His mightly muscles strained, and when he released the string, a thunderous sound rolled down the slopes of a tall hill the archer was standing on.

Meanwhile, the two commentators were not paying him attention:

"...And so, I can say without a shadow of a doubt that Mongrel is not, in fact, one of the Forgotten Shore survivors, but actually the son of the secret child of the legendary Nightwalker, the founder of the House of Night. Uh… well, this is my theory, anyway."

Syclus glanced at Dimi with a wide smile, and then turned the conversation back to the skirmishes in the ancient forest, which were starting to happen more frequently and grow in intensity.

"Is that so! Well, that secret grandchild seems to be in big trouble! Despite Mongrel's savage victory over the three other challengers, now he seems to be in the crosshairs of one of the newcomers you spoke about earlier. Let's take a look!"

The feed changed to the image of Mongrel running swiftly through the woods, dodging one giant arrow after another. His movements seemed steady and precise, as though he had a second pair of eyes at the back of his head.

Syclus glanced at the indifferent black mask and involuntarily shivered.

"Wow! Look at that… what a commendable feat, to maintain calm and composure in such a tricky situation! It is almost as if Mongrel is not afraid of anything, not even being bombarded by a rain of enchanted arrows, each of them powerful enough to pierce a Fallen

monster through! Truly, that man has nerves of steel. I wonder what he is thinking about right now…"

***

'What the hell?! How is this fair?! Crap! This is bad, this is so bad! I don't want to die so soon! What the Spell am I even supposed to do?!'

Panicking and sweating under the mask, Sunny dodged one arrow after another and cursed non-stop.

He had no idea who was shooting him, how they were able to aim through the thick canopy of the ancient trees, and where they were. All he could do was run, dodge, and pray to the dead gods that he survives this devastating barrage.

Luckily, a few moments later, he noticed a rock outcropping not too far away, with a deep ravine hiding behind it.

Dashing forward, he evaded another giant arrow and slid down the slope of the ravine. Reaching its bottom, he waded through the thick carpet of fallen leaves and pressed his back against the rocks, finally safe from the relentless sniper.

Only then could Sunny finally catch his breath and look around.

However, as soon as he did, a dark grimace appeared on his face.

'...Damnation!'

As fate would have it, he was not alone in the ravine.

Growling in frustration, Sunny gripped the hilt of the odachi and once again dodged.

A few moments later, the pleasant voice resounded over the ancient forest:

"...Challenger Agick was eliminated."

Chapter-534: Demonic Swordsman

Sunny remained in the ravine for a few minutes, considering his options and hoping that the unknown archer would have to shift to another target.

He had already revealed his ability to teleport during the Gate battle, but the quality of the recording hid the details of how he was able to do it. With the crystal clear picture of the Dream Tournament broadcast, though, Sunny couldn't risk using Shadow Step again. Even if he really, really wanted to...

Neither could he send his shadow to scout the position of the archer, which left him in a bind.

The best option would have been to stay hidden for a while, but luck was really not on his side today. Shortly after he had defeated the other Awakened taking shelter in the ravine, the sound of the rustling leaves subtly changed, and an ominous darkness suddenly moved between the roots of the ancient trees.

As more and more people were eliminated, the remaining challengers were bound to start having trouble finding new opponents in the vast arena. So, the arena was designed to grow smaller as time went by.

This year, it seemed, the players would be forced to move toward the center by the fact that the beautiful forest was slowly turning back to its true nature — that of a giant, abominable, flesh-devouring titan.

'Great! This is just goddamn great!'

Pushing off of the rocks, Sunny cursed and started climbing up the slope.

***

Some time later, full of annoyance and with sparks of light falling off his armor, he walked out of the cover of trees and entered a small clearing. There, an Awakened in a lustrous brass armor stood above the disintegrating corpses of two others, holding a heavy war hammer in his hands. A few steps away from him, another was bandaging a shallow cut on her forearm.

The man threw one glance at Sunny and rolled his eyes.

"Great! Another Mongrel impersonato…"

Before he could finish speaking, though, the blade of the odachi pierced his throat, sliding precisely between the lip of the brass breastplate and the bottom edge of the helmet.

As the body of the Awakened hit the ground, his partner looked at Sunny with wide eyes. A battle axe fell from her hands.

"Oh crap! You're… you're actually him!"

The girl turned around and tried to run, but before she could, Sunny was already upon her, ending her participation in the battle royale with one swift strike.

"Challenger Abel was eliminated."

"Challenger Wynne was eliminated."

Sunny sighed and remained motionless for a bit, resting.

…He was more than a little bit tired.

But the worst was still to come.

Suddenly, the sound of trumpets rolled across the ancient forest, and the pleasant voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"Only five hundred challengers remain!"

"Bravest warriors are: Dar of the Maharana clan, seventy-eight kills;

Fireshing, thirty-three kills; Mongrel, twenty-seven kills."

Sunny stared at the sky, the black mask hiding a grim expression on his face.

"Seventy-eight kills… gee. Who is this monster?"

He had a hunch that he already knew. Defeating his own twenty-seven opponents had not been exactly time-consuming, but looking for them was. Who wouldn't need to waste precious minutes prowling the woods in search of enemies to kill, though?

A damned archer with a strange ability to sense his targets across vast distances and through any obstacle, perhaps?

'I need to step up my game, I guess.'

It wouldn't do for Lord Mongrel to lag behind some Legacy prince.

As if to answer his thoughts, a dozen figures suddenly appeared from behind the trees, surrounding him. These Awakened were armed with all kinds of weapons, looking at him with satisfied expressions. It seemed that they had planned this ambush really well… Sunny had nowhere to retreat, and no chance to escape.

And since the midway results had been announced just a few seconds ago, it was obvious that there was at least one person with some sort of clairvoyant Ability among them. Otherwise, no one was supposed to be able to pinpoint his location this early into the battle.

What else did this bastard know?

Sunny sighed.

One of the ambushers took a step forward and smiled.

"Sorry, Mongrel. All of us here really respect you, especially after you risked your life to hold that Gate. But those Valor weapons are just too sweet, and we need to think about ourselves. No hard feelings… right?"

The menacing figure in black armor stared at the young man for a

few moments, and then an elusive, but strangely familiar voice resounded from beneath the fearsome mask:

"...None whatsoever."

Inwardly, though, Sunny was not at all calm.

'Bastards! Lowlifes! Scoundrels! Twelve against one?! Where is your shame, thugs?! Come here then, you damned cowards!

I'm gonna kill you, and then your grandmas!'

Just a moment later, the ambushers obliged. All kinds of Aspect Abilities activated at once, turning the small clearing into a furious storm of deadly elements and steel.

'...Oh crap!'

***

"Oh no! It seems like Mongrel is in trouble!"

Syclus glanced at the sea of outraged comments, and then back to the broadcast. Both he and Dimi were glued to the screen, even forgetting to do their job and fill the silence with informative or entertaining chatter.

The scene in front of them was just too… terrifying.

Just a moment ago, they saw a lone figure in black armor standing motionlessly in the center of a bright clearing, staring at the twelve ambushers surrounding him with cold indifference. Mongrel's voice sounded from the speakers, strangely dark and ethereal:

"...None whatsoever."

And then, everything exploded in a brutal symphony of violence. The ambushers attacked without wasting even a second, their assault deadly and well-coordinated.

Syclus held his breath.

'Come on, Mongrel! Use your spatial Aspect!'

From what he could see, this was the only chance the demonic swordsman had to escape.

However, as a fan himself, Syclus knew that Mongrel never used his Aspect in the Dreamscape, as if it was somehow beneath him. Mongrel only ever relied on his sword, his skill, and unadulterated technique.

'Such dignity…'

And this time, too, the mysterious warrior refused to compromise his unassailable, noble principles. Instead of activating his Ability, he simply lunged at the enemies without fear or doubt.

Then, something strange happened. His infamous odachi suddenly turned into a stream of impenetrably dark, liquid metal and flowed onto his arm, soon turning into a round shield. With that shield, Mongrel deflected an incoming javelin, then twisted his body, dodging a hail of razor-sharp windblades, and dove into an immolating stream of fire that one of the Awakened breathed out of her mouth.

…Miraculously, he emerged on the other side unscathed, like an infernal monster that could not be burned even in the flames of hell. The black armor reflected the crimson flames, somehow becoming even more menacing.

In the next second, Mongrel's spiked gauntlet connected with the face of one of the ambushers.

It was as if the poor man was hit by a mountain. His skull caved, and then exploded, the lifeless body folding as it flew to the side and turned into a rain of sparks.

What happened next could only be described as pure carnage.

The black figure pounced on the ambushers, using both his gauntleted fist and his round shield to sow devastation among their ranks. Mongrel moved with terrifying speed and devious cunning, using the bodies of his enemies to block or prevent attacks from their

comrades. Syclus wasn't sure, but he thought that he saw a couple of them die from friendly fire.

The rest fell to the demonic butcher himself, though. Every move Mongrel made was precise, calculated, and deadly… but also brutal and utterly cruel. He danced among his enemies like a grim reaper, killing them one after another without showing any sign of even knowing what mercy or hesitation were. Blood, screams, and flashes of light filled the clearing for a good couple of minutes.

And when it was all over, the lone black figure was left standing alone amidst the bodies, covered in blood from head to toe. A moment later, that blood turned into sparks of light, too, and awash in light, Mongrel stepped forward, his armor as black and pristine as ever.

Syclus remained silent for a few moments, and then said hoarsely:

"Hey, Dimi… Did Mongrel just… slaughter twelve Awakened solo?"

The older man cleared his throat.

"That, uh… you know, I might rethink my bet. Actually, my money is on that man."

His colleague blinked a couple of times. After that, he glanced at the comments and forced out a smile.

"...Is he even a man, though?"

***

Meanwhile, Sunny was on the verge of collapsing onto the ground.

'Argh! Everything hurts! What the hell, why is this stupid battle royale so intense?! I almost sullied my pants!'

That battle… hell, it was too close. He barely managed to survive, and had only prevailed because the twelve Awakened were clearly not a real cohort. They were experienced enough to coordinate their physical attacks, but when varied and unique Aspect Abilities had come into play, all their cohesion turned into pure havoc.

He had used that confusion to quickly get rid of the most dangerous opponents, and then somehow cleaned up the rest. The Mantle of the Underworld still took several solid hits… the armor itself held, but his body beneath was bruised and battered.

'Are these damn rewards even worth it? Damn, they'd better be!'

Suppressing a pained groan, he willed the Soul Serpent to turn back into an odachi, and headed away from the clearing.

'Just five hundred... four hundred and eighty-eight left. This is going to be a long day...'

Chapter-535: No Hard Feelings

A triumphant sound of trumpets resounded above the ancient forest.

"Only three challengers remain!"

"These brave heroes are: Mongrel, one hundred and eleven kills; Fireshing, eighty-seven kills; Kim Saitoh, fifty-nine kills!"

"Dream of Glory awaits, heroes!"

Sunny dragged his tired body out of the forest, feeling the ground under his feet shift and tremble. At this point, the titan was almost fully awake, and no part of the arena was safe…

With the exception of the narrow strip of sand between the dark woods and the lake that he had just reached, of course.

Sunny walked into the shallow water and stopped, using the Soul Serpent to support himself. His breath was ragged and hoarse, and there were several dents on the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld.

Almost at the same time, two more figures emerged from the darkness of the hungry forest.

One was an attractive young woman with broad shoulders and an athletic build, her long auburn hair gathered in a ponytail. She was wearing a modest red tunic, her torso protected by a leather cuirass, and wielded a light spear. Her blue eyes were tired, but clear, full of intensity and focus.

The other was a man in heavy armor, carrying a greatsword with its blade inscribed by a complicated weave of runes. His face was hidden behind the visor of a helmet, with only calm, cold eyes visible in the narrow slit. His steps were confident, but a little unsteady, betraying

a dire level of exhaustion.

'This must be Fireshing and Saitoh.'

The mighty archer had not made it. Sunny could only guess what had happened to him, but the most likely scenario was pretty obvious. The powerful Legacy must have run into an ambush similar to those Sunny himself had encountered, only with a much less happy result.

Well, that was life. Dar of the Maharana clan had paid the price for daring to stand out too much without having enough power to answer for such audacity. On one hand, it was not very fair, as far as tournaments went. On the other hand, when was anything ever fair?

Sunny much preferred to stay in the shadows, even if this damned persona of his had somewhat failed to help him in that regard.

Coincidentally, none of those who had conspired to form a group had made it this far, as well. And with a good reason — the type of person who would resort to such methods did not have what it took to win this battle, to begin with.

So Sunny was not going to underestimate his last two opponents. They had already proven how formidable they were.

…The three Awakened stood apart, looking at each other warily. The clear water of the tranquil lake splashed against their shins. The magnificent castle loomed in the distance, its ancient walls bathed in the bright sunlight. The vista was beautiful and peaceful, but the air was practically crackling with tension.

After a while, the man in a suit of heavy plate armor turned to the fiery young woman and said hoarsely:

"Let's deal with that demon together. We can decide who wins between the two of us after that thing is eliminated."

Sunny rolled his eyes.

'Wow. How unexpected.'

He gripped the hilt of the Soul Serpent, preparing himself for a tough

fight.

To his surprise, though, the young woman shook her head and said simply, a clear expression of disdain appearing on her freckled face:

"No."

He raised his eyebrows.

'Huh. Such nobility… gods, what an idiot! What a fool!'

The man called Saitoh laughed, and then glanced at Mongrel:

"How about it, Mongrel? Same offer. Let's take care of the girl first, and then have a proper duel, you and I. Or is it beneath you?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, but had no choice but to say:

"It is."

'Argh, curse it!'

Saitoh shook his head.

"Young people these days… so naive. Has the Dream Realm taught you nothing?"

Sunny raised the odachi and grinned.

"...It taught me everything."

With that, he shifted his weight and prepared to dash forward.

The time for words was over.

The other two also understood that, and in the next moment, the calmness of the clear lake was instantly no more.

***

'What the!'

As soon as Sunny moved, a powerful explosion thundered, and he

was thrown into the air by the devastating shockwave. Landing in a roll, he hurriedly slotted the Memory of Fire into the Mantle and rose just in time to see a massive fireball dissipate into the air.

His body felt even more damaged than it had been a moment ago.

Kim Saitoh, however, took the brunt of the explosion. His heavy armor was mangled and torn, patches of burned skin visible through the tears. Just as Fireshing lunged at him, tongues of flame appearing on the blade of her spear, he suddenly moved with unexpected agility, thrusting his sword forward.

He wasn't aiming at the girl, though.

'...Bad!'

Sunny noticed the rows of runes ignite with a menacing purple light, and then hastily threw his body sideways. In the next moment, a phantom figure of an armored giant appeared in the air and slashed downward, cutting the air where he had just stood with the identical copy of the same greatsword.

'What a powerful Memory!'

Since both of his enemies seemed to possess deadly means of range attack, he had no choice but to close the distance. Luckily, Saitoh was already entangled with Fireshing, who rained a barrage of lightning-fast, but precise and deadly strikes on him. It was as if the young woman was dancing, her auburn hair and red tunic flying through the air like tongues of wild flame.

'Interesting style… I should leave her for last...'

The man, meanwhile, didn't try to evade the burning spear and instead turned his body swiftly, making sure that it struck the undamaged parts of his armor. Despite being mangled by the explosion, the heavy armor held, betraying the fact that it, too, was a Memory of considerable power.

It didn't matter, though.

A moment later, Sunny was upon them and joined the fight, the dark

odachi united with the flaming spear and a runic greatsword to sing the song of steel.

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A few minutes later, the voice of the Dreamscape spoke again:

"Challenger Kim Saitoh was eliminated."

"Challenger Fireshing was eliminated."

"Challenger Mongrel is victorious! Glory to the victor!"

As blood turned into a flood of sparks and the waters of the tranquil lake became clear once more, triumphant music thundered from all sides.

Hidden behind the black mask, Sunny grimaced and suppressed the desire to plug his ears.

'What's with this terrible noise... argh! That was way too hard…'

Unbeknownst to him, the network was already exploding with countless articles, all titled more or less the same…

"No hard feelings: Lord Mongrel easily defeats a thousand Awakened!"

Chapter-536: Icon of Chivalry

'What a chore…'

Sunny dragged himself out of the Dreamscape pod and sighed.

Even though the battle royale happened inside an illusion and his body wasn't tired or bruised, the mental exhaustion was real. The qualifier round had turned out to be much more demanding than Sunny had thought.

Of course, he could have used the three shadows to augment himself and devastate the entire arena, but that would have defeated the purpose. Sunny had managed fine with just his own strength. This way, he was also polishing his technique and enriching his comprehension of Shadow Dance, which was not a small matter.

Putting on some clothes, he returned upstairs, sprawled on the sofa, and then looked at his communicator.

Currently, hundreds of similar illusory battles were being broadcasted for people to see. Some were already close to a conclusion, some were in the thick of bloodshed, and some were only just starting.

However, not every broadcast received the same amount of attention — those arenas where renowned duelists or especially powerful newcomers were fighting pulled the most of it. Sadly, due to Mongrel's infamy, the one Sunny had just finished was among the more popular broadcasts. It was also one of the earliest to end, so clips of the most exciting moments were already circulating on the network.

Sunny groaned.

'Perfect… just perfect... another damned viral clip…'

His final fight against Fireshing and Saitoh received a lot of views, but nowhere near as many as the clip of his brutal confrontation with the twelve ambushers.

The comments were exploding.

"Hell yeah! Our Lord taught these thugs a lesson!"

"Only twelve? These guys are idiots, they should have gathered at least a hundred…"

"No hard feelings? None whatsoever… gods, how can anyone be so cool?!"

"Did you see his odachi shapeshift? I was not hallucinating, right?"

"...Is it just me, or does Mongrel's hair look extra gorgeous today?"

He grimaced, then looked at the comments under the other video:

"That Saitoh guy… why did he even ask? Doesn't he know that Mongrel is an icon of chivalry?"

"Of course it is beneath Lord Mongrel! He is so noble!"

"What are you fools talking about? Mongrel is not noble! He is a wild beast! He only said that teaming up is beneath him because a beast like him doesn't need anyone's help to kill everyone! "

"Gee, so many edgelords in the comments today. Eh, I miss the early days when only true experts knew about Mongrel. His technique was way better back then, too…"

Sunny stared at the screen for a while, then shook his head.

'What's wrong with these people? Since when was I an icon of chivalry? Wait, what does chivalry even mean?'

He shook his head again, then switched to the official feed and looked up the results of his match.

Sunny, of course, qualified for the tournament the moment he had

won the battle royale. However, other participants also had a chance to move on to the next stage. That depended on their performance and individual score, so there was no set number of people who would be allowed to continue.

As it turned out, out of the thousand Awakened who had fought in his battle royale, two more qualified to participate in the tournament — one of them was Fireshing, the young woman whom he had faced last, and Dar of the Maharana clan, the archer who had almost skewered Sunny with his giant arrows.

'Huh. The bastard squeezed through, after all.'

Losing interest, Sunny turned off the communicator and yawned.

Tomorrow, the real tournament was going to begin. Around a thousand fighters — those who proved their mettle in the qualifying rounds — were going to face each other in proper duels, and after several days of intense competition, one victor was going to emerge to reap the best reward.

'I better rest well.'

He went back into the underground dojo, climbed into the sleeping pod, and closed his eyes. Soon, the familiar sight of the Sanctuary appeared in from of him.

Without wasting any time, Sunny left the Altar Island, went to his room, crashed on the narrow cot, and almost instantly fell asleep.

...Who said that there was no rest for the wicked?

***

The next morning, Rain appeared at his doorstep for the training session, punctual as ever. Luckily, the tournament was not going to start until noon, so Sunny didn't have to find an excuse to cancel their lesson.

Not that he would. This was much more important than some stupid tournament. He could get powerful Memories elsewhere, but every day that passed was one less day for him to increase his sister's

chances of survival. So, tutoring Rain took precedence.

The girl repeated the movements and katas he had shown her the last time. Her form was as horrible as he had expected, but Rain was nothing if not diligent. She was improving with every set, slowly correcting the mistakes he pointed to her and absorbing the technique into her bones. For a complete novice, she was doing rather great.

'Runs in the blood, I guess.'

Making sure that she couldn't see, Sunny faced away and grinned. At that exact moment, his communicator received a message. After looking at it, his mood improved even further.

The message was from Aiko, informing him that the soul shards he had retrieved from the Wormvine were finally sold. Transcendent shards were infinitely more rare and precious than those of lesser Ranks — not only because they stored more essence, but also because there were Aspect Abilities and spelltech applications that depended on the quality of the raw materials used.

So, Sunny just became considerably richer.

He had not dared to sell Solvane's soul shard, though. There were certainly Awakened out there who could determine the nature and source of a shard. If anyone learned that he was in possession of one coming from a human Saint, Sunny would have to answer too many uncomfortable questions. So, he had just given it to Kai instead.

Strengthening the members of his cohort was, in a sense, the same as strengthening himself, so Sunny didn't feel that aggrieved because of the loss of potential profit.

…It was still incredibly sad, though!

After the training session was over, he made a tasty breakfast for himself and Rain. The girl was hungry as a wolf, so she destroyed the contents of her plate in record time.

When she was almost done, Sunny glanced at her with an incredulous expression and asked neutrally:

"Has that tournament of yours started?"

Rain swallowed the last bite and smiled.

"The Dream Tournament? Yes, the qualifying rounds were yesterday."

He took a sip of tea, acting indifferent.

"Oh really? Right, I think I saw some clips on the network. Uh… did you?"

She nodded.

"Yeah…"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then mentioned as if he just happened to think about it:

"I, uh... hear that that Mongrel guy is quite good."

Rain scoffed.

"...Sure, I guess. But I don't like him."

Sunny almost choked on his tea.

"What? Why?"

It took a lot of effort to keep his voice calm and conversational.

'Why don't you like Mongrel?! Mongrel is awesome! He defeated twelve Awakened solo, you know!'

The girl simply shrugged.

"I don't know. He just seems pompous. And who does he think he is, going around teaching people how to live? Plus, what's up with that mask? A good person wouldn't have to hide behind a mask, that's what I think."

Sunny glared at her with a bit of resentment, then forced out a smile.

"Well, I don't know. The mask is a powerful Memory, for sure. And he

probably doesn't even want to teach people anything… at least that is my impression…"

Rain frowned.

"Plus, he caused so many problems for Night! If he had the tiniest bit of conscience, he would have come forward and refuted those ridiculous rumors… but I bet that he doesn't!"

Sunny's eye twitched.

'Aha! So this is the root of all this! Just you wait, Kai… I'll repay you for this one day!'

He slowly took another sip of tea and asked, hiding his outrage.

"You seem to know a lot about that tournament, huh? I thought you weren't very interested in that kind of stuff."

Rain sighed.

"I am not. I just thought that maybe I'll see that Awakened again… the woman who saved me. But she's not participating."

Sunny wanted to say something, but before he could, the girl added:

"...Well, of course. A true Awakened like her would never waste time on something frivolous like this. She is probably busy doing something important… exploring the Dream Realm to help humanity, protecting people from the Nightmare Creatures. Stuff like that, you know."

Sunny smiled.

"That is certainly a possibility… wait, what do you mean? A true Awakened wouldn't waste… didn't you suggest that I participate in that tournament?"

Rain looked at him as though he was stupid.

"That's you! And that's her… what kind of question is that? By the way, what time it is… oh, goodness! I have to run…"

With that, she hurriedly waved Sunny goodbye and dashed to the door, leaving him completely stunned.

'....What the hell is that supposed to mean? That's me, and that's her?'

He remained motionless for a while, then slowly closed his mouth and looked at the time.

As it turned out, he had to hurry, too. The tournament duels were about to begin.

…Walking toward the elevator, Sunny was seething with anger.

'That's me… well, of course, that's me! I'll show her… hell, I'll show all of them! I mean, Mongrel will... ah, curses!'

Chapter-537: Learning Curve

The opening ceremony of the tournament was supposed to be a spectacular event, with thousands of challengers — each of them a talented Awakened fighter — gathered in the magnificent central courtyard of the illusory Bastion. Slightly more than a thousand of them were those participating in the individual competition, and the rest were members of competing cohorts.

The representative of the great clan Valor welcomed them and gave a short speech, after which an androgynous person of undetermined age in exquisite silk garments — the eccentric Saint responsible for creating the Dreamscape — followed suit.

This Transcendent had a hypnotically beautiful face that was, for some reason, plastered with an unreasonable amount of makeup, and a genteel, almost effeminate bearing.

If Sunny was there, he would recognize their pleasant voice as the one that read all the announcements in the Dreamscape.

But he wasn't.

Why would he waste time on these theatrics? He skipped the speeches, the performances, the incredible montage of the most exciting moments from the battles of the previous day, and even the event that everyone had been waiting for with bated breath — the formation of the tournament bracket that would determine who would face whom and in what order.

Sunny didn't care who was going to fight him, he just wanted to kill somebody as soon as possible.

With each round of duels, half of the participants were going to be eliminated. That meant that he had to win ten consecutive fights to receive the best reward. Of course, it wasn't an easy task… by now,

there were no amateurs remaining in the tournament. Every single one of the thousand challengers was a formidable warrior, and by the end of it, only true talents would remain.

It was also a perfect chance for him to try and learn their polished battle styles.

Sunny waited until the bracket was almost complete and finally dove into the Dreamscape. The menacing black figure of Mongrel appeared among the crowd of challengers, causing a bit of a stir. Immediately, those closest to him began to whisper.

"Hey! It's him!"

"Man. The bastard is even scarier in real life. That scene from the montage... gods, I'm so glad we chose to enter the tournament as a cohort!"

"Ptui! What's the big deal? I hope I draw him as an opponent… crushing this wannabe should be fun…"

Ignoring the whispers, Sunny looked around with curiosity. He wasn't interested in the people gathered around him, but in the courtyard itself. This was his first time inside Bastion… well, an illusory version of it. Still, he couldn't help but feel a bit of awe. This was a legendary place… one of the earliest Citadels conquered by humans, their greatest foothold in the Dream Realm.

The seat of a Great Clan's power.

...And the former stronghold of one of the daemons.

It was like he was part of history.

Sunny's curiosity didn't last long, however, quickly drowned by anger and annoyance.

'That girl! What does she even know!'

His hands were itching to slaughter someone.

Finally, the bracket was complete. Sunny didn't bother to study it and

just prepared himself for the battle.

A few seconds later, his vision darkened for a moment, and then he found himself in the courtyard again — only this time, the crowd of challengers was gone, leaving only him and his opponent standing opposite each other.

There were flags streaming in the air, and thousands of excited spectators looking down from the stands. They were chanting, screaming, and waving their hands.

His opponent was a young man in a striking bloodred armor, wielding a long espadon. He looked vaguely familiar.

As soon as the young man saw the black mask, his face paled.

"I knew this would happen! Crap, not agai…"

Sunny growled and dashed forward, raising the Soul Serpent.

A few moments later, a human head flew into the air, the audience exploded with cheers, and the pleasant voice announced:

"Challenger Paradise in Red was eliminated!"

***

Syclus was in the middle of a lighthearted discussion with Dimi when the producer of the broadcast addressed him through the earpiece, forcing the young man to blink a couple of times and mask his surprise with a smile.

"Ah, sorry to interrupt you, Dimi, but it seems we already have a win! Wow, that was fast!"

The feed changed to a replay of a swift and brutal duel that ended before the voice of the Dreamscape could even introduce the fighters. That was a first in his memory...

"Ah, ha-ha! Of course, it was Mongrel. Who else?"

His colleague laughed.

"Such bad luck for his opponent! I hope that he is not disheartened. There is no shame in losing to such a fearsome enemy… everyone who made it through the qualifying rounds already deserves our respect. Back in my day, getting into the tournament was much easier…"

Syclus agreed, glanced at the figure in black armor standing motionlessly above the corpse of his opponent, and couldn't help but shiver.

Was it just him, or did Mongrel look especially ferocious today?

'Maybe he really is a Nightmare Creature…'

After that first unexpected win, several other heated duels were shown. Syclus and Dimi switched from commentating on them to commercial breaks, to sometimes joining the other commentators to spectate the most exciting cohort battles. After a while, it was Mongrel's turn to fight again.

This time, the producers switched the feed to his duel beforehand, expecting another fast and brutal kill. However, they were left disappointed. In that duel — and during a couple of next ones as well — the enigmatic swordsman seemed to lose all his edge, and engaged in protracted, slow, exhausting battles with his opponents, only managing to dispatch them after long and arduous fights.

Syclus, who was somewhat of a Mongrel fan, but not a diehard follower, was a bit confused by the sudden change.

Luckily, he had an expert partner.

"Hey, Dimi… why does it seem that Mongrel is struggling all of a sudden? After his performance yesterday, I was sure that we would see pure carnage again!"

The older man chuckled.

"Ah, I see that you did not do your homework! That is what Mongrel does, and what makes him so dangerous. Yes, it might seem as though he is struggling, but in fact, he is not. He is… learning."

Syclus glanced at the chat, then laughed.

"No, I am sure that Dimi didn't mean "learning to suck". But, uh… what exactly did you mean, Dimi?"

The resident expert smiled.

"Mongrel is known as a genius fighter not because he is strong and skilled — there's plenty of such people among the duelists — but because he has an uncanny ability to absorb and mirror his opponent's battle style. So what you see is not him losing, it's him trying to comprehend the enemy's technique through being on the receiving end of it. It is truly remarkable! And a bit terrifying..."

Syclus stared at the feed and finally noticed that, indeed, Mongrel's style seemed to change with every duel, closely resembling that of his opponents. His strange weapon also shifted and changed to mirror theirs.

'...So cool!'

He turned to the camera with a wide, delighted smile.

"Well, there you have it, folks! So don't dismiss Mongrel yet… who knows, maybe he will shock us all yet!"

***

Soon, it was time for Sunny's last duel of the day. Once again, he appeared in the courtyard and glanced at his opponent, excited to learn what style they were going to use.

When he saw the enemy, though, a dark smile appeared on his face.

'What a nice surprise… so we meet again! Or rather, for the first time. Yesterday, we didn't have a chance to get properly acquainted, you bastard…'

Opposite him stood a tall young man with broad shoulders and an incredibly muscular physique. He looked mighty and confident, like a statue of an ancient deity come to life.

...It was the damned archer who had almost sniped him from across the arena during the battle royale.

'Dar of the Maharana clan, was it? Well, well. Let me introduce myself…'

Chapter-538: Devouring Styles

This was the fifth and final duel that Sunny had to fight today.

His previous three opponents all practiced unique and interesting styles, so he had taken his sweet time trying to learn from them. He succeeded twice and failed once.

The first opponent was called Straw Hat and used a curved sword, his technique relying on extreme speed and flexibility. Even Sunny, who had himself trained to make his body as malleable as possible, struggled to keep up with this unpredictable opponent.

The alias of the second one — The Other Fool — was a bit familiar, but the style he used was not. Sunny spent a lot of time trying to understand the strange pattern of essence expenditure the fighter used, all the while dodging unpredictable attacks of his exquisite halberd. In the end, he learned a lot from this fight.

However, it was the third opponent that had really tested him. This Awakened, whose alias was Blue Vash, wielded a slender rapier and practiced a deceptively simple battle style. What separated him from the rest was that each of his movements was utterly perfect, and every one of Sunny's mistakes had been instantly punished.

It was as though the man had a supernatural ability to see even the tiniest flaw in his enemy's technique, and was able to immediately exploit it. No matter how hard Sunny had tried to comprehend the essence of the style Blue Vash was using, he couldn't grasp it. In the end, he was forced to overwhelm and kill the astute fencer just to survive.

However, despite that failure, he learned from this fight even more.

Regardless, after several duels against such talented fighters, Sunny felt that his mastery of Shadow Dance, which had stayed stagnant for

a while, was finally progressing again. He was slowly approaching a precipice.

That was why he was so glad to see Dar of the Maharana clan.

To some, facing a Legacy might have seemed like a tough break. But for Sunny… for Sunny, Legacies were like gift boxes! They hid all kinds of goodies, his for the taking.

The problem was that, just like the Covetous Coffer, this box in particular could potentially bite off his greedy hand.

…The young Legacy fighter wasn't using a bow anymore, of course. Which wasn't a surprise. Legacies were trained to be proficient with a multitude of weapons, and a duel was not a place for arrows. Instead, he was holding a menacing great mace, its round head brimming with sharp spikes.

What made this guy so dangerous was not his bow, in any case. It was his strange ability to zero in on the enemy and somehow perceive their every move… or whatever it was that had allowed him to barrage Sunny with arrows from afar with frighteningly high precision.

While Sunny was staring at the mighty Dar, he was looking back at Mongrel. The scion's gaze traveled across the Mantle of the Underworld, making Sunny shiver for some reason, and then reached Weaver's Mask.

Suddenly, the muscular young man frowned.

"...Strange. An Ascended armor, and an… Echo?... for a weapon. Even if it is just Dormant, you've done well for yourself. But that mask… where did you get it?"

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched.

Chatty enemies… they were the worst. Especially ones with such a keen vision.

"Took it off a random corpse."

He paused, and then added with calm indifference:

"Shall we start? Or do you need time to run to the other side of the arena, hide, and summon your bow?"

Sunny was trying to antagonize the young Legacy on purpose, hoping that he would forget this line of questioning. Luckily, his strategy worked.

Dar of the Maharana clan grinned.

"No… no need. Who knows... maybe I'll take it off your corpse one day, too…"

With that, he raised his heavy weapon, and suddenly lunged forward with a speed that no one his size was supposed to possess. The spiked mace whistled through the air, and in the next moment, the sound of clashing steel rang across the arena.

***

'Strong…'

Sunny was thrown back by the force of the impact. His block held, and the Soul Serpent held, too. However, he failed to adjust the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld enough, so his body was pushed back.

'How the hell is he so strong? I have three soul cores, dammit!'

Dar didn't care. He was much taller, had much more muscle mass, a much longer reach… not to mention that as a Legacy, he could have had many charms and Memory enchantments feeding him strength, agility, and resilience. This fight wasn't going to be easy.

Before Sunny could even properly land, the mace was flying at his head again. He pivoted on one leg, dodged the spikes, and dashed forward, hoping to close distance and get up close to the opponent, where his small stature and the shorter weapon would give him an advantage.

The Soul Serpent lashed out, aimed at the enemy's heart. Dar was

wearing a light leather cuirass that left his shoulders and arms exposed, so Sunny hoped to pierce it with one blow. However, to his surprise, the tip of the odachi slid off the light leather armor as if it was forged from adamantine steel instead.

'Damn Legacies...'

The Legacy in question spun his mace, forcing Sunny to retreat, then glanced down at the spot where a tiny scratch was left on his cuirass. When he looked up again, his eyes were full of dark amusement.

"...Not bad."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Still running his mouth! Let's see if you have any breath to waste in a couple of minutes!'

The two of them clashed again, exchanging dozens of blows. Both were strong, fast, and skilled. Neither could easily overwhelm the opponent.

This was the second time Sunny had to fight a Legacy… third, if he counted Nephis. The difference was incredibly obvious.

His previous opponents were talented and experienced, but none of them could compare to Dar. This young man was a deadly battle machine crafted to reign on any battlefield, trained from the moment he had taken his first step to wield weapons of war and destroy his enemies.

He was no match for Caster, however... but Caster had never gotten the chance to become an Awakened. Once a Legacy learned to control the flow of soul essence, their power grew exponentially. Which was what Sunny was currently experiencing — raw power shaped into a deadly weapon by long years of relentless practice, and superb skill.

…And yet, he wasn't worried.

Dar was powerful, skilled, and experienced… but he lacked something that people like Sunny had — the memory of fear and

bitter defeats, knowledge of death, and a vicious will to persevere.

Sunny didn't doubt that the Legacy had spent a lot of time in the Dream Realm, battling Nightmare Creatures… but he did doubt that Dar had ever found himself in absolute despair, having to claw his way back to life. His experience was that of fighting down, and not fighting up.

As Master Jet would say... he wasn't a killer.

But Sunny was, and so, the Legacy had already lost this fight, even if he didn't know it yet. He was only alive because his enemy was interested in learning sophisticated battle styles.

And there was a lot of sophistication in Dar's aggressive and domineering battle style. Legacies were truly in a league of their own… this was not something that Sunny could learn in a heartbeat. He needed time.

And so, their violent duel had turned into a slow, but terrifyingly intense battle of attrition. A minute passed, then another, then another... the two fighters were still entangled in a ferocious melee. The spectators were at the edge of their seats, holding their breaths as they watch the incredible spectacle. The direct feed of the duel was gathering more and more viewers.

'Bastard… how are you doing this? How?!'

Sunny was trying to peer into the core of Dar's style, but failed to understand its essence over and over again.

…Until he didn't.

'I see! So this is how! It was so obvious…'

By that point, both of them were exhausted and wounded, their reserves of essence running dry. Sunny had much more left, of course — even though continuously enhancing his physical prowess and using the [Feather of Truth] enchantment of the Mantle was hungrily eating through shadow essence, he had three times the capacity. He also had much better control of it, it seemed.

All the time Sunny had spent meditating in the Sky Below was not for nothing, after all.

Feeling the foundation of Shadow Dance grow stronger, Sunny grinned behind the mask, and suddenly changed his entire attitude. His movements turned sharper and more aggressive, his demeanor bold and overbearing. The Soul Serpent turned into liquid darkness, and then shaped itself into a spiked mace.

Dar was thrown off by the sudden change, but only for a moment.

...However, that moment was all Sunny needed.

Dodging the enemy's attack before it could even fully manifest, as if reading the Legacy's thoughts, he dove under the strike and delivered a crushing blow of his own.

His enemy's leather armor still held, but the bones beneath it did not. Dar's ribcage caved, and he spat a stream of blood. In the next second, another hit connected with his jaw, turning the young man's face into a bloody mess.

He fell to his knees and raised a hand, desperately trying to block the finishing blow.

The demon in black armor knew no mercy, though. Calmly raising the mace, he brutally brought it down.

The crowd let out a collective scream.

In the silence that followed, a pleasant voice announced:

"Dar of the Maharana clan was eliminated."

Chapter-539: Out of Reach

Sunny climbed out of the pod and stretched, lamenting the fact that Dreamscape capsules weren't as sophisticated as the sleeping pods used to enter the actual Dream Realm. Due to his luxurious metal sarcophagus, he had almost forgotten the rusty feeling of spending too much time inside one of these things.

Despite the fact that the duels themselves had not lasted too long, an entire day already passed. Sunny was somewhat tired, but instead of resting, he commanded the Soul Serpent to shape itself into a weapon and walked to the middle of the dojo. He was impatient to cement the knowledge of the battle styles he had absorbed today.

Sunny started to perform various katas, executing each one slowly at first, and then quicker, and quicker, and quicker still. Soon, he moved with incredible speed, his lithe and flexible body almost leaving afterimages behind. Lean muscles were rolling under his pale skin, which soon glistened with sweat.

Sunny fluidly shifted from one style to another, his movements simultaneously firm and flowing, sharp and gentle, clear and unpredictable. The Soul Serpent flowed from one form to another, too, as insidious and shapeless as the person who wielded it. It was as though Sunny was performing a strange, graceful, viciously complicated dance.

…His three shadows danced with him, moving swiftly on the ceramic plates of the armored floor.

If Sunny could look at himself right now, he would be surprised to see that his movements were eerily similar to the dance that the young slave girl had once performed in his dream. But while her movements were beautiful and smooth, his were deadly and sharp. Hers were flawless, while his were slightly crude… as if he had not mastered his art yet.

'I can feel it… the second step. I can feel it, but why can't I reach it? Something is missing…'

After a long time, Sunny tiredly fell on the cold ceramic floor and remained motionless for several minutes, his chest moving heavily. There was a tired, but determined expression on his face.

'More, I need more. More and better…'

***

In the morning, Sunny had some free time before he had to enter the Dreamscape again. Making himself a cup of tea, he relaxed in a comfortable chair and took out his communicator.

After yesterday, the number of duelists remaining in the tournament had drastically reduced. Now, there were only thirty-two of them left. Each one was a formidable opponent, so Sunny decided to study their previous fights a bit. Luckily, all the recordings were readily available on the network.

…His were, too.

"Now I am even more sure that Mongrel is a Legacy. Or an actual demon! Who else could have defeated that monster, Dar?"

"Aww... Mongrel knew that this guy was an archer, so he even offered to give him time to get away. He's so cordial! So noble! What an inspiration!"

"You mean an actual DEMONESS, right?"

Sunny shivered and, not even trying to look at the comments, hurriedly scrolled past these videos to start doing his research.

'Maybe one of these guys will help me advance to the next level of Shadow Dance…'

Out of curiosity, he also glanced at the cohort competition leaderboard. The team that was currently in the first place was called "Librarians" and, weirdly, consisted of only two people. Their aliases were Unorganized Laundry and Iza, which didn't tell him anything.

But considering that these two were currently dominating much larger cohorts, they must have been a truly fearsome duo.

Initially, Sunny had only joined the Dream Tournament to reap the alluring rewards, so he had not thought much of it. But now, he was starting to suspect that it was going to be a humbling experience.

He had already faced several troublesome opponents that earned his reluctant acknowledgment, and things would only get exponentially harder from here. Due to his recent progress, Sunny had allowed himself to become a little vain. He was stronger and more experienced than most of the Awakened he met, so he had almost forgotten to always expect the worst.

Seeing these powerful Awakened helped him remember how dangerous it was to underestimate the enemy.

And these weren't even the true elites. Real powerhouses of the Awakened world would never reveal their might in a public tournament.

…Sunny was one of these hidden tigers himself, after all, so he would know.

With a dark expression, he shook his head and concentrated on the screen of the communicator.

***

Very soon, he was back in the arena. Sunny had skipped all the theatrics again and only entered the Dreamscape at the last minute, hoping to avoid any situation that could lead to him being asked questions.

Sadly, he couldn't avoid his opponents, and if they wanted to talk, he had to answer.

Currently, he was facing a man wearing a peculiar armor made out of rusted metal, their face grim and full of dark apprehension. He was in his early thirties, and looked like someone who had led a rough life.

"Challenger Mongrel has joined the fight!"

"Challenger What? No, wait! Has joined the fight!"

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny raised his eyebrows.

'What's up with that alias? Wait... why does it sound familiar?'

While he was trying to remember where he had heard this bizarre name, the man summoned a shield and an arming sword, glanced at him darkly, and asked:

"You're the new guy everyone is talking about?"

Sunny sighed, knowing what would follow.

"No."

His opponent frowned.

"Why are you lying?"

Sunny rolled his eyes, exasperated by all the talk. However, he didn't want to attack the older man recklessly. His opponent had to be quite powerful to get this far.

"I am not lying."

The man sneered.

"That's exactly what a liar would say! Do you think I'm an idiot?"

'Gods! Can you just attack already!'

Sunny took a step forward and said:

"Yes."

The older man stared at him for a few moments, his face full of anger and confusion. After a while, he hissed:

"Brat, you must be courting death..."

Chapter-540: Blood Feud

The peculiar man had an excellent technique, but it seemed as though anger was clouding his judgment. Sunny spent several minutes dodging and blocking his attacks, carefully observing both the enemy and the enemy's shadow. It wasn't long before he was able to grasp the essence of the enemy's style.

'There… I understand now…'

After more than nine hundred duels in the Dreamscape, his ability to comprehend different battle styles had considerably improved. And this guy wasn't using anything he had never seen before — his technique was polished, but unoriginal. Not that there was anything wrong with that, except that it was also too straightforward and inflexible.

'How did he even get so far?'

Since there was nothing else for Sunny to learn, he switched from defense to attack and delivered a swift strike, leaving a shallow wound on the opponent's shoulder. A few drops of blood landed on the Mantle of the Underworld… and in the next moment, Sunny learned just how the man was able to climb so high on the tournament ladder.

Suddenly, the blood shone with menacing crimson light and exploded, throwing Sunny back and tearing the Soul Serpent from his hand. At the same time, his enemy's wound ignited with dim red radiance, and in the next second, his movements became much faster, his blow carrying much more weight.

'...What the hell?'

Sunny barely dodged a devastating downward slash, rolled away, and grabbed the hilt of the odachi — just in time to block another strike

and be thrown back a few steps again.

'How is he suddenly so strong?!'

He struggled desperately to keep up with the man in rusted armor, who had somehow instantly become utterly overbearing. In the process, another drop of blood landed on him.

'Crap…'

The Mantle withstood another explosion. Its surface did not crack, but Sunny could tell that the armor was weakened. Jumping back to his feet, he gritted his teeth and continued to fight.

Pretty soon, his suspicion was confirmed. The enemy seemed to possess an Aspect related to blood. His first Ability allowed him to ignite it, and the second increased his strength and speed the more he bled. So every time Sunny managed to perform a successful attack, the man grew much more formidable, while Sunny himself had to either dodge the drops of blood or somehow survive another explosion.

…But he wasn't worried.

By now, Sunny had realized that there were four types of challengers who tended to do well in this tournament. The first type relied on skill, the second type relied on a powerful Aspect, and the third type relied on excellent Memories.

While the latter two were tricky to deal with, only the first type was really dangerous.

The fourth type, of course, was the most deadly — these were fighters who had both formidable skill and powerful Aspects, as well as an arsenal of fearsome Memories at their disposal. Luckily, there weren't many such people around.

This guy was obviously an opponent of the second type, and relied too much on his bizarre Aspect. To defeat him, Sunny just had to think of a counter, and in this case, the counter was pretty obvious.

Since every wound made his enemy stronger, he just had to finish the

bastard off in one strike.

And since the warrior in rusted armor neglected to truly develop his technique, that was not that hard to do.

After another explosion, Sunny increased the weight of the Mantle of the Underworld and withstood the shockwave, then made it as light a feather and dashed forward. He understood the essence of the enemy's style already, so it wasn't hard to predict his next move.

In fact, Sunny had manipulated the man into doing exactly what he wanted.

Once his opponent raised his sword to block a vicious slash, Sunny shifted his weight and suddenly changed the direction of the attack, sidestepping as he pushed his sword forward. The Soul Serpent scraped against the enemy's sword and slid effortlessly into the visor slit of the rusted helmet.

Immediately, Sunny dismissed the Shadow and jumped as far back as he could.

He was just in time.

The body of the man in rusted armor shuddered… and then violently exploded, causing the whole courtyard to tremble. If Sunny was just a tiny bit slower, he would have been pulverized by the explosion, too, and his enemy would have avenged himself from beyond the grave.

Well... from beyond being eliminated from the tournament, in this case.

'What kind of an Aspect is that?! Phew... I guess this is why Awakened are so dangerous. You just never know what kind of weird crap they are capable of…'

As the crowd exploded with applause, the voice of the Dreamscape announced:

"Challenger What? No, Wait! was eliminated."

Sunny, however, didn't pay it any attention.

Because almost at the same time, the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have received a Memory.]

***

A few moments later, Sunny was back in the black void, staring at the fake pattern of radiant strings with a perplexed expression.

'Huh… that's crazy!'

He knew, of course, that it was possible to exchange Memories in the Dreamscape. This illusion was a mystical space created by a Saint's Aspect Ability, after all, and not an artificial VR simulation.

What he had not known, however, was that one could just receive a Memory out of nowhere, without the usual requirement of being in physical contact — even if that contact was illusory — with its master. However, if the Saint in question was responsible for delivering the rewards, then it sort of made sense.

More importantly, though… he had received a Memory!

His eyes gleamed.

Sunny was already eligible for several smaller prizes, most of them in the form of credits or soul shards. He wasn't going to bother receiving them, though — even if there was a way to do so without leaving a paper trail, Sunny didn't know of one.

The Memories, however… that was an entirely different situation!

Summoning the runes, he quickly read:

Memory: [Memory of Ice].

'Wait... that sounds familiar. Don't I have a [Memory of Fire] charm already?

Indeed, the Memory he received was eerily similar. It was another protective charm!

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Charm.

Memory Description: [...Even when the sun returned, they shivered and remembered the neverending winter.]

Memory Enchantments: [Bitter Cold.]

Enchantment Description: [This charm provides the wearer with moderate resistance to cold.]

A wide smile appeared on his face, hidden behind the black mask.

'Now that… that is what I am talking about!'

Chapter-541: Battle of Two Demons

"An incredible win by Lord… uh, by Mongrel!"

Looking at the cloud of blood rising above the arena, Syclus couldn't contain his enthusiasm.

Today, there were no simultaneous duels, as there were only thirty-two contenders left. Each battle was intense and exciting, and received the full attention of the commentators.

Looking at the cheering audience, Dimi laughed.

"Indeed, indeed… Mongrel did very well against No Wait. That Aspect of his is a real menace, believe me. I've been on the receiving end of those explosions way too many times!"

Dimi had been one of the first renowned duelists of the Dreamscape, back when it had been just growing popular ten or so years ago, so he was talking from experience.

Syclus glanced at the chat, knowing that it was a good time to involve the viewers in the discussion. Coincidentally, he noticed a comment concerning something that he himself was curious about.

"Yeah, very devious! But, Dimi… don't you feel like Mongrel behaved a bit out of character today? I mean, he practically called a respected Dreamscape veteran an idiot. With how noble, dignified, and chivalrous Mongrel usually is…"

Dimi thought for a bit, then shook his head.

"You see, Syclus… I respected Mongrel before, but now I truly admire him. It takes a very talented fighter to quickly recognize a battle

style, true. Mongrel is talented... but he is also wise."

He smiled.

"Because it takes a very wise man to quickly recognize an idiot. And make no mistake, this guy is a complete buffoon! Believe me, I have the misfortune of knowing him pretty well. I mean… only an idiot would end up with an alias like "What? No, Wait!"... right?"

Instantly, a deluge of comments flooded the chat:

"True! Mongrel is so wise!"

"Wise, deadly, and handsome!"

"How do you know that he's handsome, fool? He never takes off that creepy mask!"

"You mean SHE is handsome? Wait, that doesn't sound right…"

"...Can someone ban that troll already?!"

"Dimi is right! Only a complete idiot would end up with that alias. Why would an idiot like that even try to fight someone as wise as Lord Mongrel? Ptui..."

***

'Oh! I remember where I've seen that weird alias!'

Sunny was preparing for his next duel when he suddenly remembered how he had entered the Dreamscape for the first time. Back then, he had almost ended up with that exact name after accidentally saying the words out loud. Luckily, it had already been taken. Otherwise, Sunny could have been called "What? No, wait!" himself.

'So that's the guy! Poor fellow…'

…Not that being called Mongrel was much better.

Slightly amused, he sat down and circulated his essence through the coils of the Soul Serpent, aiming to replenish it completely before the

next fight.

He had a feeling that it wasn't going to be easy…

***

He was right. None of his next three duels were easy, although for very different reasons.

The second opponent he faced today was called Lowph. It was a young man with shoulder-length hair who wore a light armor, wielding a round shield and a spear. His technique was impeccable, but the most dangerous thing about him was his speed.

Lowph was fast. Very fast. So fast, in fact, that Sunny could barely see some of his movements. The worst part was that this speed did not come from an Aspect Ability, but simply from skill, training, and incredibly precise essence control.

Unlike Caster, who could move with insane speed constantly, the young man seemed deceptively slow until he chose to attack, at which point his weapons almost teleported from one place to another. Sunny only managed to resist because his enemy skillfully masked the movements of his body, but didn't think to mask the movements of his shadow.

The smart thing to do was to kill the deadly opponent as fast as possible, but Sunny was utterly fascinated by the way Lowph used his soul essence, so he lingered, trying to infer details of this technique from how the young man fought.

That was why Lowph ended up being the first human to make Mongrel bleed.

At some point, his spear slid between the breastplate of the Mantle and one of the spaulders, sinking deep into Sunny's armpit. The pain was blinding.

Twisting the blade and then retreating to save himself from a retaliatory strike, Lowph glanced at the vibrant crimson liquid on his spear and smiled.

"...So you're human, after all."

Sunny suppressed the pain and tilted his head slightly:

"Am I?"

Then, he dashed forward and went all out, aiming to end the fight as soon as possible — not because he was done learning Lowph's style, but because even with Blood Weave, he wasn't sure that he would last long, considering how serious his wound was.

Thanks to his brutal battle with Caster, Sunny already knew how to deal with fast enemies. So, in the end, neither speed nor incredible mastery of essence managed to save the young man from his blade.

The deep wound disappeared as soon as Sunny returned to the black void.

'Interesting. Very interesting! I have ways to go as far as controlling essence goes, it seems.'

The next duel could have been really, really tough, but ended up being only slightly torturous. His enemy this time was named Everain and possessed a powerful sorcerous Aspect centered around gravity manipulation.

As soon as the fight started, it felt as though a mountain fell on his shoulders. Sunny was barely able to move, while his enemy masterfully weaved the effects of Aspect Abilities into an already swift and lethal combat technique, making for a truly deadly combination.

…Luckily, Sunny had [Feather of Truth], which diminished the burden a little. More importantly, he had a rich experience dealing with the Crushing. Even though Everain was able to make him sweat by manipulating gravity with admirable ingenuity, he was victorious in the end.

The third duel, however… made him rethink a lot of things.

This time, his enemy was a friendly-looking guy with a funny alias, Dynisor. Weirdly, he wore simple garments instead of an armor and

wielded no weapons. At first, Sunny thought that this was another sorcerer… however, he couldn't have been more wrong.

As soon as the voice of the Dreamscape announced the start of the duel, his opponent… changed. His muscles suddenly ballooned and shifted, ripping through the simple clothes. His skin glistened, becoming covered by metallic scales. His nails grew into terrifying talons, and his teeth turned into long, sharp fangs.

In just a few moments, what faced Sunny was not a human, but a frightening hybrid creature that resembled a predatory humanoid lizard. A split second later, the creature was already upon him in a furious whirlwind of claws and teeth.

However, while it looked like a Nightmare Creature and was as strong and fearsome as one, the hybrid fought with a measured technique of an experienced, cunning, battle-hardened brawler. The effect was nothing short of terrifying.

The Ability humans received after conquering the Third Nightmare and becoming Transcendent was called a Transformation Ability, but not all transformation-type Abilities were meant only for Saints. While extremely rare, some Aspects manifested similar powers at earlier stages. Song Seishan possessed an Aspect like that, as well.

However, while Sunny knew that such Awakened existed, this was his first time facing one in battle. And what a battle it was!

It was really worthy of being the penultimate spectacle of the whole tournament.

It was also the first fight where Sunny felt that he really might lose. The enemy was just too strong, ferocious, and overbearing… while also being skilled, intelligent, and subtle. Fighting him was like fighting a devil, or a demon at least.

In fact, while Sunny had no idea, this was what their duel was being called on the network — the battle of two demons!

And one of these demons was bound to fall.

Under the stunned gazes of numerous spectators — both those in the

Dreamscape and those watching the broadcast on the screens of their communicators — Mongrel was pushed back by the rampaging monster, his dark odachi sliding off the steel scales without leaving even a scratch on them. Nothing he did seemed to have an effect.

But then, something changed. At some point, the demonic swordsman dismissed his great blade and lunged into a violent, terrifyingly brutal hand-to-hand combat with the towering creature, using his fists, legs, and even the horns of his mask to attack the enemy. His style changed, turning savage and vicious, insidiously deadly, and utterly ruthless.

Those who followed Mongrel for a while and knew a fair share about combat were stunned to recognize that style… it was the same primal, devastating way of fighting the Barrow Wraiths had used during the recent Gate disaster!

So Mongrel was able to learn from Nightmare Creatures, as well...

What a terrifying thought!

The uncompromisingly cruel brawl lasted for a dreadfully long time. In the end, both fighters were bloodied and broken, their bodies battered, but their murderous wills as sharp and unshaken as ever.

Mongrel's onyx armor had cracked in several places under the unrelenting assault of adamantine talons, but the hybrid's scales were also shattered and torn, his movements slowing down more and more.

And then, unexpectedly, it was all over.

Mongrel had caught his enemy into an armlock, and then bent, straining with all his might. A loud crack could be heard in the deathly silence that had settled over the arena a while back, and the creature's neck suddenly twisted at an unnatural angle.

At first, people couldn't believe their eyes.

Only when the massive body of the hybrid reptile shuddered, and then turned into a flood of white sparks did they open their eyes wide and started screaming with shock, joy, and admiration.

Swaying lightly, Sunny looked at the disappearing torrent of sparks and grinned.

'...One more left. Gee, I wonder what I'll get this time!'

Chapter-542: Polite, Reasonable Online Discussion

Sunny had received generous rewards for these three duels… well, for two of them, at least.

One was an Ascended Memory of the second tier, which was an arrow. The second was an Ascended shield of the third tier. Both had pretty great enchantments, but he had no time to study them in detail. All he had determined was that the Memories were good enough to not be fed to Saint.

The third reward, though… was a bitter disappointment. It would have been rather amazing, actually, for anyone else — a hundred soul shards, no less! In the waking world, this was a precious resource. Even lesser Legacy clans would not scoff at that amount.

But since Sunny couldn't claim it, he was left with nothing.

'Curses…'

His disappointment didn't last long, however. In the end, it didn't really matter. The real boon was the prizes those in second and first place would receive — and Sunny had already cemented his position in the final duel.

The winner and the runner-up were going to receive Memories from clan Valor's personal armory. And this was something every Awakened desired, because the Great Clan was renowned not only for its knights.

It was also famous for its forgers.

Members of the Valor family often received Aspects tied to forging and creation. Some of them could even create Memories, tailor-made

for destroying Nightmare Creatures and conquering the dangerous expanses of the Dream Realm. Sunny doubted that they would put something really unique as a prize for a public tournament, but anything from their vault was going to be precious.

What's more, he had already enriched his mastery of Shadow Dance a lot. The last three duels especially had pushed him even closer to grasping its second step. Now, he felt as though it was almost within his reach.

So, participating in the tournament was a pretty good idea, after all.

'I should really thank Rain… no, wait… she doesn't know that I am participating. Also, I am not participating in the tournament… Mongrel is! Damn, why is everything so convoluted… I should really rest for a bit.'

After the battle with Dynisor, he wasn't in the best shape. That fight was nothing short of brutal… even Sunny, who usually thrived in brutality, was a bit stunned by how violent it ended up being. His wounds had disappeared as soon as the duel ended, but mental exhaustion remained. His essence was also really spent, since that was how the Dreamscape functioned.

Luckily, the organizers of the tournament were smart enough to not schedule the final fight anytime soon. First, there would be the duel for the third and fourth place, as well as some entertainment. He had hours to rest and recuperate.

With a tired sigh, Sunny left the Dreamscape, climbed out of the pod, and went to make himself a tasty dinner.

***

While eating, Sunny studied his opponent.

This year, the final duel was going to be a bit unusual, because both challengers were not powerful newcomers who entered the Dreamscape to win the tournament rewards, but habitual duelists — well, if Mongrel could be considered one.

He had heard about the woman he was going to face, too, but not

much.

Her alias was Queen Bee, and she was almost as enigmatic as Sunny himself. Unlike other popular duelists, she didn't broadcast or promote her fights, preferring instead to remain anonymous and under the radar. It seemed as though she was only interested in dueling itself, and nothing else. From what he knew, Queen Bee had never lost a duel. She was an undefeated champion of the arenas.

Why would someone that powerful hang out in an illusory game? He had no idea. But Sunny wasn't one to judge, since he was also wasting his time there despite having better things to do. He had his reasons, so maybe she did, too.

Or maybe it was just a fun hobby.

In any case, the network was full of theories about who Queen Bee might be. There was even a rumor that she was not human at all, but instead an artificial construct created to keep the players from reaching the top spot and to remind them to always strive for greater mastery. Which was complete idiocy, of course, considering that Dreamscape was not capable of emulating actual intelligence.

If it was, Awakened wouldn't waste time fighting each other and train against simulated Nightmare Creatures instead.

But people believed what they wanted to believe…

And people were also insane!

'What the hell…'

Sunny stared at the communicator with a weird expression.

To no surprise whatsoever, Queen Bee had her own army of unreasonable fans — even though she didn't want any. And currently, that army was engaged in an all-out war with Mongrel's own unwanted horde of followers. The network was bursting with venom and vitriol produced by both sides.

"Lord Mongrel? That loser? Ptui! Come back when he's King Mongrel, you tasteless dimwits!"

"You fool! Mongrel never claimed to be a lord, and he would not want to be a king! Mongrel is one of us, common people! Wanna follow a tyrannical monarch, do it privately, you sheep!"

"Who are you calling sheep, you sheep?! That shady Mongrel guy has literal horns, so think before you bleat!"

"Guys, can we all calm down? Why are we arguing? Isn't it obvious that Mongrel IS Queen Bee? They're the same person! There won't be a duel!"

"That guy is insane! Mongrel can't compare to our noble Queen's left pinky!"

"That guy is whack! That pathetic wannabe princess can't compare to honorable Lord Mongrel! Ridiculous!"

"...Well, at least we can agree that the previous commenter is an idiot."

"You're an idiot!"

"...I guess not."

Sunny stared at the screen, his eye twitching.

After a while, he turned away.

'Humanity is a mistake. Maybe it's time to give someone else a chance… I hear mushrooms are a pretty neat species…'

Turning off the communicator, Sunny concentrated on devouring his food… even though all that nonsense had almost killed his appetite.

Sunny's appetite, however, was as resilient as he himself was. Maybe even more. It was more or less impossible to kill.

***

A few hours later, Sunny returned to the arena.

It was time to end this spectacle and reap his rewards.

However… first, he had to defeat the strongest opponent yet.

'It's gonna be fine… I'll get a sweet Memory either way…'

But winning would be much better.

...As soon as he appeared, the crowd cheered.

Chapter-543: Finale

Hearing the thunderous cheer, Sunny almost flinched.

The last duel of the tournament was different from all the rest. The courtyard had changed slightly, somehow becoming even more magnificent. The grandstands were extended, with dozens of thousands of spectators crowding the stone seats. Their cheers blended into a deafening, excited roar that rose and fell rhythmically, like the sound of a turbulent sea.

Rose petals were raining from above, covering the arena in a beautiful carpet.

…No matter how cynical Sunny wanted to be about the whole thing, it was hard not to feel his blood boil at this scene.

He turned his head slightly, taking in the sight of the chanting crowd. Then, his sight lingered for a few moments on a tall tribune that loomed above the arena, decorated with the vibrant vermilion banners of the Great Clan Valor. Since this was the final duel, very special people were going to spectate it in person.

Sunny easily recognized the creator of the Dreamscape, who was dressed in ridiculously colorful silken robes and looked like a parrot that had taken a bath in a tub of face powder. He still couldn't believe that this gaudy clown was an actual Saint…

The person near him had to be the representative of Valor, then. Sunny couldn't see much, and just noted that it was a young woman with dark wavy hair and alabaster skin. She wore an intricate suit of lusterless, black armor and a red cape, which was the same color as the banner of her clan. Her sharp and austere appearance was in stark contrast with the Saint of Dreamscape.

The tribune was too far away to see any details, but Sunny wasn't

inclined to stare at a Legacy from a Great Clan, anyway. He was already uncomfortable knowing that she would be observing him fight.

On the other hand…

'I better put up a good show. Who knows, maybe if that girl likes it, I'll receive an extra good Memory!'

Throwing these thoughts out of his mind, Sunny finally lowered his gaze and studied his opponent.

Since Sunny knew some of the best fighters of his generation, he had entertained the idea that he might have met the formidable Queen Bee outside of the Dreamscape already. But no, she didn't seem familiar.

The famous duelist was seemingly in her thirties, and even though the lower half of her face was hidden behind an elegant half-mask, he was sure that he had never seen her before. She stood calmly in the center of the arena, as if not affected by the cheering crowd and the esteemed guests in the audience at all.

From just one glance, Sunny knew that he was looking at a combat master. Everything about the regal woman spoke of skill, grace, and resolve. She wore a light metal armor and wielded a slender estoc, its blade long and sharp. There was a strange serenity about her that somehow seemed simultaneously alien and familiar…

'...Clarity? This is the same vibe Neph sometimes gave off…'

Indeed, it was the same type of clarity that Nephis, and Sunny himself, possessed. But while Changing Star was sharp and inevitable like a striking sword, Queen Bee was not. On the contrary, she seemed deceptively placid.

'What a weird contradiction.'

The woman studied him, too, allowing Sunny to look her in the eyes. They weren't blue, grey, green, or even purple, and instead seemed to shift from one color to another, as if reflecting her mood. The strangest thing about them, though, was that… those weren't the eyes

of a killer.

Sunny knew how to recognize one, because he was a killer himself.

He suppressed the desire to scratch the back of his head.

'Huh… combat master, but not a killer? Don't tell me that this is really just her hobby…'

What kind of a hobby was that?!

In any case, this was going to make things a little easier for him. Sure, Queen Bee might have been a prodigal duelist — she wouldn't have gotten to the finale of the tournament otherwise — but without the killing instinct, defeating someone like Sunny would be nearly impossible.

For him, combat was not something interesting or engaging. It was not something he did for fun, or even his profession. It was simply his life.

God of War was not called the God of Life for nothing. Life was a constant, brutal struggle, and Sunny knew it better than most. That was why he was such a vicious and cruel fighter, never missing out on the tiniest chance to destroy his enemy.

…That was not to say that the duel was going to be easy. Killer or not, Queen Bee was still a fearsome opponent.

With a sigh, he summoned the black odachi, put its blade on his shoulder, and walked forward.

***

The trumpets sang and the voice of the Dreamscape announced the names of the fighters, lunging into a solemn speech afterward. Sunny didn't listen to it and simply approached the middle of the arena, then hesitated and performed a small, awkward bow toward the graceful woman.

He wasn't a courteous person, but in this situation, bowing seemed somehow appropriate.

Queen Bee looked at him calmly, and nodded lightly. Then, she raised her estoc into position.

'This is going to be tricky…'

He sighed, gripped the hilt of the Soul Serpent… and lunged into a lightning-fast attack.

What was the point of wasting time?

Sunny was trying to overwhelm his opponent in one fell swoop, but of course, he failed. The long blade of the slender estoc flew with incredible speed, preventing him from approaching Queen Bee to deliver even a single strike. For a few seconds, nothing but the ringing of steel could be heard above the arena.

Even the audience grew quiet, looking at the incredible fight with bated breath.

Unlike the previous duels, there was nothing flashy or particularly spectacular about this one. It wasn't as brutal as the battle between Mongrel and fearsome shapeshifter Dynisor, nor was as strange and exciting as his fight against the gravity sorcerer Everain. There were no fascinating Aspect Abilities flying around, and instead, it was all about skill, steel, and technique.

However, people who knew even a little bit about combat couldn't take their eyes off the intense confrontation. Every strike, every block, every step the fighters took was full of flawless precision, insight, and clear resolve. This was a battle of two masters, and thus it was much more thrilling and breathtaking than anything else they had seen in this tournament.

…Sunny, however, was having much less fun than the audience.

In fact, he wasn't having any.

'What the hell?! What is going on?!'

Chapter-544: Glory to the Victor

Something was very, very wrong with this duel. He had noticed it almost instantly, but couldn't do anything to prevent the whole fight from going sideways. In fact, although it seemed as though he was holding his own and even advancing on the regal Queen, Sunny was actually scrambling to save his life every second.

This woman was just too weird!

There was something wrong with her shadow… not the harrowing, unnatural kind of wrong that he had felt before in the Dream Realm, but a very mundane kind of wrong which, nevertheless, threw him for a loop.

It was as though there was a slight disconnect between how the shadow moved and how the woman casting it moved. More than that, although Sunny watched Queen Bee's movements and footwork carefully to predict her next attacks and react to them, each time, he was ending up being slightly mistaken.

Even if he misplaced his sword by a centimeter, it was already enough to mess up the whole cadence of the fight and allow his enemy to bypass his defenses.

'How is she doing this?!'

He had to find the answer very soon, because every second that passed could potentially lead to his loss.

Sunny tried to deflect an incoming thrust, but missed by a few millimeters once again. As the result, the swift estoc slid past the blade of the Soul Serpent and stung him in the chest, sending a tremor running through his entire body. The Mantle of the Underworld protected him, but Sunny wasn't deceived.

Queen Bee was just measuring him, learning his patterns just like he was learning hers. When she achieved a sufficient level of understanding, the next attack would pierce his neck instead of ricocheting off his armor.

'Like hell…'

Gritting his teeth, he suddenly changed his style, summoning the domineering technique of Dar of the Maharana clan and applying it to the odachi. He was already losing to the slender estoc in speed, so turning the Soul Serpent into a heavy great mace was not the best choice. So, Sunny just made adjustments to the battle style on the fly.

But just as he shifted to another style… Queen Bee did the same, suddenly transforming her technique into a completely new one!

'Damn!'

They continued to fight, moving swiftly across the arena as their swords clashed against each other. Sunny was still at a disadvantage, which was only growing larger and larger as the seconds passed. Both fighters were proficient in various styles and could switch from one to another almost instantly, which made the duel especially thrilling.

The audience was going crazy.

...Sunny was going crazy, too, but for an entirely different reason.

'Think, think…'

Facing an enemy like this was a golden opportunity to enhance his comprehension of the Shadow Dance. But to do that, he first had to understand what exactly Queen Bee was doing!

Why was her shadow behaving so strangely? Why was he always mistaken when judging the precise placement of her attacks?

At some point, Sunny almost slid on the damn rose petals that littered the arena and only barely managed to keep his balance, dodging the tip of the estoc at the last second.

'Curses! Damned things! Whose bright idea was it to fill the damned

arena with trash?!'

In fact, it was a miracle that neither of the two duelists had suffered from this treacherous footing already!

'A miracle… wait... a miracle?'

Dodging another lethal strike, he shifted from balanced technique to defense and glanced at Queen Bee's feet again.

From start to finish, she had not been bothered by the rose petals once.

And now that he paid attention to it…

His eyes widened.

'...Am I seeing things?'

No, he wasn't.

Not only did his graceful opponent avoid losing her footing on the slippery petals, but… none of them were also crushed under her armored boots.

It was almost as if she was always hovering a few millimeters above the ground without actually touching it.

No, not almost… that was exactly what was happening!

Such a small difference was very hard to notice, but it explained why the angle of how Queen Bee's shadow hit the ground was ever so slightly wrong, and why Sunny was always misjudging her attacks a tiny bit.

A few millimeters was a very minuscule amount, but in a battle as precise and calculated as theirs, it made for a huge difference.

'Hell…'

Was he right?

There was only one way to find out…

Sunny continued to fight for a few seconds, thinking carefully. He didn't correct his mistake, knowing that giving away his new understanding of Queen Bee's Aspect Ability… if it was an Ability… would be a wrong move.

Instead, he had to construct a trap and end the fight with it.

…But trapping someone as skilled and talented as his current opponent was not easy. In fact, deceiving someone who had clarity was a very tall task.

Luckily, Sunny was a skilled fighter himself. But better yet, he was an even more talented deceiver. So, he continued to pretend and prepare his ambush, all the while greedily absorbing his enemy's technique. Now that he knew the secret, he could see it much more clearly.

At some point in the duel, Mongrel seemed to finally make a mistake. He once again misjudged Queen Bee's intention and threw his blade too low, allowing the estoc to slide above it and flash toward his throat.

However, it never hit its mark. Instead of piercing Mongrel's neck, the slender blade simply left a deep cut on his skin… because at the last moment, the demonic swordsman moved ever so slightly to his left, and then almost instantly dashed forward.

The dark odachi hissed as it cut the air, and the figure in black armor moved past the graceful woman in light armor, stopping a couple of steps behind her.

Feeling a stinging pain radiating from the shallow wound on his neck, Sunny sighed and lowered the Soul Serpent.

Behind him, Queen Bee swayed lightly, and then fell into a torrent of white sparks.

For a couple of seconds, the magnificent courtyard was silent.

And then, it became filled with deafening cheers from the crowd.

Sunny looked at the celebrating spectators, breathing heavily.

'Did I… did I really do it? Did I win?'

As if to answer his thought, the voice of the Dreascape announced:

"Challenger Queen Bee was eliminated. Glory to the victor! The champion of the annual Dream Tournament is…"

However, the pleasant voice was drowned by the chanting of the crowd:

"...Mongrel! Mongrel! Mongrel!"

Chapter-545: Mongrel Victorious

Sunny swayed slightly and thrust the Soul Serpent into the ground, leaning on it for support. His breath was labored and ragged. The wound on his neck had already disappeared, but drops of crimson blood remained on the onyx surface of his fearsome armor.

All around him, the crowd was going crazy.

"Mongrel! Mongrel! Mongrel!"

The fight against the noble Queen had not been as savage and bloody as some of his previous ones, but it had been incomparably harder. Even though each of the fighters had only managed to land one strike, the mental strain and physical effort the duel had required of them was nothing short of tremendous. Facing a true battle master was a tough trial.

Sunny was completely spent… but more than that, he was also bitter and full of fury.

'Damnation! I almost had it!'

Not paying the crowd any attention, he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the dissipating sensation he had felt during the last seconds of the intense battle against the undefeated champion of the Dreamscape.

During their fight, after grasping the secret of the elusive Queen, he had come close to making a breakthrough in his mastery of the Shadow Dance. It had been so close that Sunny could practically see it… but in the end, he failed to make the last step. There was an invisible obstacle in his way that had pushed him back, one that he didn't know how to overcome.

Something was still missing… all the styles he had absorbed created a vast and solid foundation, but it was not enough. At this point, he knew that the problem was not quantity. He had already done the groundwork. Then what? What did he need to do to bring this stage of Shadow Dance to completion? Find a unifying element?

Face even more formidable opponents?

Sunny didn't know, which made him extremely frustrated.

However, he didn't receive any time to savor his frustration or consider the issue deeper, because a thundering voice suddenly drowned out the roar of the crowd.

Up on the central tribune, the Saint of the Dreamscape had risen from their seat and was now looking down with a brilliant smile, already in the middle of an excited speech.

'Right… I won! I am about to receive my reward!'

Sunny grinned behind the mask and straightened, lifting the odachi and putting it back on his shoulder.

The reward… wasn't this why he had entered the tournament in the first place? And now, it was finally time to reap it!

The Saint was going on and on, showering Sunny with praise.

"...glory… marvelous… duty of the Awakened… true warrior… bravery… courage… future of humanity…"

'Gods, can you just get to the point?!'

Sunny didn't care about all that nonsense, he just wanted to receive his prize and disappear. However, he had to stand in the middle of the arena like the world's most fearsome scarecrow and endure the endless barrage of flowery words flying out of the grandiloquent Saint's mouth... for a while.

'This guy… uh, woman?... this person really likes the sound of their voice, huh…'

At least it gave him a chance to recover.

After something that felt like an eternity, the Saint was finally finished with their long speech and gestured at the representative of Valor.

"... personally reward the winner!"

As the crowd applauded, the young woman in black armor stood up and approached the parapet of the tribune. Then, she smiled at the audience and looked down at Sunny.

Suddenly, he felt a small shiver run down his spine.

The young woman was smiling in a friendly manner, but her eyes were as cold as the sharpest of swords. They were also of a strange, vibrant color — bright red, the same as her full lips and vermilion cape. With her alabaster skin and raven-black hair, she looked both beautiful and daunting, like a lethal blade.

The pressure she exerted could be felt even from where Sunny stood.

'...A Master.'

The young woman spoke, her raspy voice easily reaching all across the arena. It sounded friendly enough, as well as strangely familiar, for some reason.

"I am Ascended Morgan of clan Valor. Congratulations, warrior… ah, what a splendid duel it was! You truly are a worthy winner!"

Sunny stared at her for a moment, then bowed his head slightly, expressing his respect… well, pretending to.

Smiling in response, Morgan of Valor continued:

"...And you are truly worthy of wielding a Memory forged by the smiths of the great clan Valor. In fact, your remarkable skill brought me so much joy that I have decided to gift you one of my personal armaments!"

'Jackpot!'

The thing Sunny had hoped would happen did, indeed, happen! Ascended Morgan seemed to be in a very good mood. Whatever it was that a Master of one of the Great Clans had in her arsenal was bound to be good!

The young woman waited for the excited cheers of the crowd to quiet down and looked at him with a curious smile.

"Tell me, what do you wish to receive? A weapon?"

'Yes, a weapon would be great!'

Sunny started to smile, but then, suddenly, his eyes widened.

'Crap!'

…And before he could think of a crafty lie, the Flaw forced an answer out of his mouth:

"...No."

'Crap, crap, crap! Curse it!'

Morgan of Valor tilted her head a little.

"A suit of armor, then? Or maybe a powerful charm?"

'Yes! Yes! Both would be good!'

Sunny gritted his teeth, but the result was inevitable. He had no choice but to answer in a hollow voice:

"Neither."

The young woman laughed.

"Really? Maybe you want to receive an Echo, then?"

'Oh, no…'

Mongrel remained silent for several seconds, and then answered:

"I do not."

Sunny was on the verge of shedding bloody tears. How had it all gone so wrong, so fast?

Master Morgan studied him for a bit, then leaned on the parapet and asked in an amused voice:

"Really? What do you want, then?"

Sunny panicked. He obviously wanted to receive one of the rewards she had mentioned, but it was precisely because he did that Weaver's Mask would not allow him to say it. He scrambled to salvage the situation and get at least something out of this disaster…

Suddenly, a crazy idea appeared in his mind.

And then, in front of countless thousands of people, Mongrel said something shocking:

"...You, Ascended Morgan. I want to duel you."

Chapter-546: Morgan of Valor

A stunned silence settled over the resplendent arena. A sea of spectators was staring at Sunny with wide eyes, not sure if they had heard it right. Even the Saint seemed shocked and uncertain about what to do.

Surely, Mongrel had not just… challenged a Master of the Great Clan Valor to a fight?

In that silence, a bright laughter suddenly rang, rolling over the vast courtyard. It was Morgan. She was laughing with a delighted expression on her face, her striking vermilion eyes full of mirth and amusement.

A few moments later, she looked down and asked, her raspy voice relaxed and steady:

"Oh, really? You want to fight me?"

Sunny stared at her from below, and nodded.

"Yes."

…But of course, he didn't. He might have been a little bit crazy, but not nearly crazy enough to wish to fight an Ascended serving one of the Sovereigns. Hell, that Morgan girl could have been Anvil's own daughter, for all Sunny knew.

However, the fact that he would rather avoid such a confrontation didn't mean that fighting Morgan would be of no benefit to him. In fact, Sunny felt that it could push him to finally mastering the second step of Shadow Dance. A member of a Great Clan had to have a lot to teach him.

'Plus… who knows? If I win, she might give me the reward anyway.

Anything else would just look petty…'

So, even if Sunny was against the idea, it was the best bad idea he had managed to come up with.

As for how he was supposed to win against a Master… that depended on Morgan herself. If Sunny was right, she would not unleash her full power on him, be it out of pride, a sense of fairness, or simply to save face.

The young woman, meanwhile, was still looking at him from above. Her scarlet lips were curved into a slight smile.

"...Such an audacious wish."

She leaned back… and in the next moment, the crowd gasped.

Morgan of Valor easily jumped over the parapet and plunged down, soon landing on the floor of the arena dozens of meters below. A whirlwind of rose petals rose into the air from the force of the impact, but the young woman herself seemed unperturbed. She simply straightened and walked toward Sunny with the same easy smile.

He instantly tensed.

'Curses… she actually accepted?'

Until then, Sunny still had hope that Morgan would refuse his daring request.

But she seemed pleased by it, instead. Stopping opposite Sunny, the young woman studied him for a bit, and then glanced back at the tribune.

"Venerable Thane… if you would…"

The bewildered Saint remained silent for a few moments, and then cleared their throat.

"Uh, yes… of course…"

Almost immediately, the pleasant voice announced:

"Challenger Morgan has entered the arena."

"...Morgan has challenged Mongrel!"

She smiled, then turned back to Sunny.

"...That's better."

Morgan studied him for a moment, and then shook her head.

"No, that won't work. As an Ascended, I can't expect an Awakened — even one as skilled and distinguished as you — to really have a chance in a duel against me. Huh. What shall we do?"

She thought for a bit, and then smiled again.

"Ah! I have an idea!"

With that, her dark armor and vermilion cape suddenly disintegrated into a torrent of scarlet sparks. The young woman was left standing in a simple black tunic, her feet bare. She then proceeded to hide one hand behind her back, and summoned an unremarkable straight sword into the other.

"I will only use one hand and a dormant weapon. One minute… if you survive against me for one minute, the win will be yours. That should be fair."

Sunny scowled behind the mask.

'Isn't she too full of herself?! What an arrogant… and pretty… wait, no! What an arrogant woman!'

No matter how he felt about it, Morgan's offer was exactly what Sunny had wanted. This way, he really stood a chance… even better, there was no need to augment himself with shadows and reveal more of his strength.

He just had to fight for sixty seconds and try to learn as much as he could in that short time. And if he happens to win, maybe the prize

would still be his.

…Lowering the Soul Serpent, Sunny stared at his Ascended opponent and calmly asked:

"Shall we start?"

Her smile widened.

"Your wish is my command, my lord Mongrel. Although… a piece of advice for the future… you should really be careful what you wish for…"

Just a moment later, Sunny realized that sixty seconds… were going to be an eternity!

'What… what the hell?! Is she even huma… crap!'

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Sunny didn't have words to describe how monstrous Morgan was. It was obvious that she held back and did not use all of her strength, but even then, he was instantly overwhelmed.

The young woman in a simple black tunic was just too swift, nimble, and skilled. She read his movements as if he was an open book and easily demolished his defense, raining a barrage of strikes on the onyx surface of the Mantle of the Underworld.

Even though her sword was too weak to break the adamantine armor, each blow carried enough might behind it to make Sunny shudder and for flashes of sharp pain to radiate through his entire body. He was certain that his bones would have already cracked if it wasn't for the Bone Weave.

He tasted blood.

What's worse, Morgan of Valor had no blemishes on her mentality, as Dar of the Maharana clan or Queen Bee had. She was as vicious and ruthless as he himself was… maybe even more so.

A born killer.

And while Sunny barely had a couple of years of battle experience, she was an older and much more terrifying beast. She was tempered, her skill was forged and sharpened by thousands of bloody battles… that much was obvious.

Just a few seconds later, he was already barely staying alive.

'Curse it! How I am supposed to survive that?!'

Chapter-547: Forged in Battle

Feeling his flesh break apart and his heart grow cold, Sunny scrambled to defend himself, but to no avail. Morgan easily crushed his attempts to resist and delivered another series of devastating strikes, moving with terrifying precision and speed. Her movements were fluid and natural, as if wielding a weapon was as innate to her as breathing.

As if battle was her native environment instead of peace.

Her swordsmanship was unlike anything Sunny had ever seen, too. It wasn't even as though the sword served as an extension of Morgan's arm… it was as though she herself was the sword, and so every motion she made was the purest expression of cold, merciless killing intent.

He had never thought that he would meet a more terrifying swordsman than Nephis, but compared to this knight of Valor, the daughter of the Immortal Flame clan almost seemed like a novice.

Sunny was instantly overwhelmed, and there was nothing he could do to maintain even a sliver of control. The situation was utterly hopeless. This feeling of absolute, bitter powerlessness… he had not experienced it in a long time.

Attain a breakthrough to the second step of Shadow Dance? Sunny wasn't even sure that he would be able to stay alive for another couple of seconds.

...He had to think of something fast.

Following a mental command, the Mantle of the Underworld received one of his charms. Immediately, the familiar, but strongly enhanced pain of his soul being torn apart flooded his whole being with agony.

Sunny didn't hope that the Broken Oath would help him defeat Morgan — after all, as an Ascended, she had a much more powerful soul. All he wanted was a second of respite.

Morgan suddenly slowed down, allowing him to disengage and take several steps back. For a moment, there was a slight grimace on her face, but it was quickly replaced by the same relaxed, amused smile.

"A nice trick."

Sunny bent slightly and vomited a mouthful of blood, thin streams of crimson flowing through the fangs of the black mask. The sight of it was both frightening and striking.

When he straightened, something about him changed.

…Well, of course it did. He had commanded two shadows resting on the Autumn Lead to wrap themselves around his body, after all. Instantly, his strength, speed, and resilience tripled.

Sunny had not wanted to augment himself before, but faced with the devastating onslaught of the terrifying battle master, he had no other choice. If he wished to learn anything from this fight, he had to make it last more than just a few seconds.

Morgan noticed the subtle shift in his posture, and tilted her head slightly. Her smile suddenly widened.

"...Good. This is good. This is much better!"

Sunny dismissed the Broken Oath, but before the charm even had time to disappear, the young woman was already upon him once again in a whirlwind of ruthless steel. However, this time, things were different.

Or rather… slightly different.

'What… what the actual hell?!'

Sunny was still hopelessly outmatched, barely managing to survive under the merciless barrage of lightning-fast, cruel attacks.

Previously, he had judged that his peak physical might would be on par with a newly ascended Master. Even though Sunny wasn't currently using the third shadow — it had to remain on the ground to keep his secrets — the gap between Morgan and him was not supposed to remain that vast.

But there was a mistake in his reasoning. He had compared himself to an average Master… however, Morgan of Valor was not average in any way. She hailed from one of the three Great Clans, and was possibly even a member of its core family.

Among the Awakened, she was a being at the absolute apex of might.

'Come… on!'

And yet, he was able to do something now, at least. Even though Morgan was still dominating the fight and delivering one devastating blow after another, Sunny could perceive her movements and react.

He dodged one strike, then deflected another. A third one still connected with his elbow, sending a blinding flash of pain through his body, but it was already an incredible achievement.

Morgan seemed pleased by this new development. Her crimson lips curved, revealing pearly white teeth.

"Yes! Finally! You are supposed to be a genius, aren't you? Show me! Come on, fight!"

'What the hell… is wrong with this girl…'

Sunny gritted his teeth and fought, barely staying alive. No matter how much he pushed himself, how much he struggled to keep up with the fearsome Master, all he could achieve was not being instantly obliterated.

But that was it.

Even with two shadows augmenting his body, Sunny saw no hope of winning — despite the fact that Morgan was holding back her strength. She was simply a monster. No… she was something much more terrible. He had faced and killed many monsters, many demons,

and many devils… but none of them could compare to this beautiful, horrifying young woman.

However… even if he was going to lose... it was all not in vain.

With every blow he suffered, every strike he somehow defended against, Sunny was learning. Morgan's battle style was too elevated for him to grasp, but every glimpse of it he saw was fueling something inside of him.

It was as though he had laid a solid foundation by absorbing numerous styles, and now they were being forged into something different, something whole by the insane pressure fighting this monstrous creature exerted on him.

His body felt as if it was on the verge of breaking apart, and his vision was slowly becoming blurred, but Sunny felt… he felt as though he was on the verge of a revelation.

And when it came, it was as though a floodgate was opened in his mind.

Suddenly, all the disparate fragments of knowledge he had absorbed formed into a cohesive tapestry, allowing him to see the shared logic between the various styles he had learned. He was able to perceive these styles from a new perspective, understanding not only their purpose, but also much of the reasoning behind each technique and movement much deeper.

'Yes! This is it!'

…And due to this new level of insight, Sunny was also able to see a flaw in Morgan's assault. Her one and only weakness.

Yes, the young woman herself was too powerful and skilled for him to destroy. But her sword… that was a different matter. It was just a Dormant Memory, after all.

Instantly, a plan formed in his mind.

As time seemed to slow down, Sunny deflected another blow, shifted his body slightly… and then suddenly took a step toward the flashing

sword, catching its blade between his left arm and his torso, and then bringing his right fist on it.

He put all of his strength behind it, increasing the weight of his gauntlet as much as he could at the last moment. All his muscles strained, on the verge of exploding.

After numerous clashes against the adamantine surface of the Mantle of the Underworld, the sword was weakened already. So when Sunny's fist connected with it, the steel blade simply shattered, exploding into numerous sharp splinters.

'...Got you!'

Burning with dark excitement, Sunny continued his movement, aiming to bring the Soul Serpent down on now defenseless Morgan before she had time to process what had happened and adjust.

…But before he could, terrible pain suddenly exploded in his chest, and all strength left his hands.

The hilt of the odachi slid from his fingers, and the dark sword silently fell to the ground.

Sunny swayed, and then looked down in confusion.

'What... what happened?'

What he saw didn't make any sense.

Morgan's pale, slender hand was protruding from his armor, blood streaming down the smooth onyx surface. She had… she had pierced the Mantle of the Underworld with her bare hand, her fingers plunging through flesh and bone to tear his heart apart.

Sunny had made a mistake.

'How… is this possible… Ascended… Memory… sixth tier…'

He looked up, darkness shrouding his vision.

'Is this… what it feels like… to die?'

Everything was dark, and all he could see now were two beautiful vermilion eyes, staring at him with regret and… disappointment?

Morgan sighed.

"Thirty-six seconds.... well done. You fought well…"

The last thing Sunny felt before slipping into nothingness was a spark of energy traveling from her hand into his body.

And then, he found himself in the black void of the Dreamscape. His pain disappeared, as did his wounds. He felt healthy and whole.

The duel was over.

As he stared into the darkness, the Spell whispered quietly:

[You have received a Memory.]

But he didn't react, looking into the void with a heavy frown on his face.

…Somewhere above, near the set of images representing different arenas, a string of words floated:

"Mongrel"

"Victories: 935"

"Defeats: 1"

Chapter-548: The Road so Far

Sunny shut down the illusion. The underground dojo was silent and submerged in darkness, almost like the lightless expanse of his soul.

Crawling out of the Dreamscape pod, he glanced at it, and then walked to the middle of the hall. There, he sat down on the cold ceramic plates of the floor, crossed his legs, and closed his eyes.

Back in the illusory world created by the will of an eccentric Saint, the tournament was coming to an end. There were spectacles, festivities, and accolades being given to the winners. But he didn't care.

He didn't care about the legend of Mongrel, either. Sunny had no doubt that his inexplicable refusal of the final reward and daring challenge had created quite a stir. Were people praising Mongrel for his resolve and ambition? Or mocking his defeat and calling him a fool? In any case, the network must have been boiling right now.

Sunny couldn't be bothered to check.

He had much more important concerns.

There was the final reward he had received, given to him by Morgan of Valor despite his failure, as well as previous rewards he had no time to study well.

And there was Shadow Dance. This was what he had to concentrate on now.

Sitting in the darkness with his eyes closed, Sunny thought back to the revelation he had received during the battle with the monstrous Master and started to slowly digest it. He had the key now… all that remained was to absorb it, turn it from a fleeting feeling into an inseparable part of his mind, body, and soul.

That was going to take some time.

Fragments of Morgan's battle will helped him find unity in the discordant collection of battle styles he had amassed. His comprehension of the fundamental, governing principles of battle techniques was vastly elevated, allowing him to understand them on a deeper level.

This enlightenment was going to help Sunny grasp various styles much faster, as well as mirror more complex and sophisticated battle arts with ease. At this level, he needed to be able to recognize patterns of essence control from how the enemies moved, breathed, and attacked. The new understanding was going to help with that, too.

He just had to assimilate it all.

Time slowly passed. Sunny continued to meditate, making slow progress toward his goal. After a while, his thoughts began to wander.

The Dream Tournament… gave Sunny much more than he had expected.

Yes, there were powerful Memories and a breakthrough in his comprehension of Shadow Dance, but there was also something else. Different, but no less valuable.

Fighting the best of the best that the Dreamscape had to offer had helped him to put his own prowess into perspective. Facing formidable champions one after another showed Sunny just how much more powerful and experienced than them he was.

Sunny was always comparing himself to Nephis, and inevitably finding himself falling short. He chased after her with desperate resolve, but was never able to catch up. Mongrel might have been only defeated once, but Sunny had been defeated countless times. He lived in the shadow of constant failure.

But it was exactly because he had been chasing after Changing Star without rest that he had left everyone else in the dust without even

noticing. Now that he had a chance to look back, Sunny finally saw just how wide the gap between himself and all the rest of the Awakened had become.

It was so wide that he had been able to cut the best of them down while barely using a quarter of his power.

Back on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had learned a simple truth — if one wanted to better themselves, they had to challenge those who were stronger than them. Nothing was more beneficial to one's growth than fighting against a superior opponent. That was why and how he had transformed himself into a lethal killer in the span of a single year.

And even though Sunny had not understood it before, using Nephis as a reference point achieved the same result. Even if the goal of surpassing her often seemed bitterly unattainable, he had come far by struggling to do so against all odds. So, so far.

He saw it clearly now.

…But he also saw how much further he had to walk.

Just as fighting the participants of the Dream Tournament had shown him his strength, fighting Morgan had shown him his weakness.

Yes, Sunny was incredibly powerful for an Awakened of his age. But there were other giants out there, no less terrifying than him. They were older, stronger, and had years of battle experience and vast resources that he lacked. In front of them, Sunny was like an ant…

A subtle smile appeared on his face.

'...Or, maybe, like a cockroach.'

Morgan was a Master of the Great Clan Valor, and as such, she was a peak existence among those below the level of a Saint. She was kin to one of the Sovereigns. So he could use her as a benchmark to know what was the worst he could expect. Another reference point to strive for, one more superior opponent to temper himself against.

One day in the future, they might have to cross swords again. And

when that happened… he knew that her vermilion eyes would not end up full of disappointment again.

Instead, they would be full of fear.

…All these thoughts traveled idly at the edges of his consciousness, while most of his mind was occupied by absorbing the key to the second step of Shadow Dance. And just as that last thought disappeared, he finally felt that the process was complete.

A moment later, the silence of the underground dojo was suddenly destroyed by the voice of the Spell. Sunny flinched, not accustomed to hearing it in the real world, let alone inside his home.

The Spell said:

[Your Aspect Legacy mastery level has increased.]

[You have received the right to claim a Legacy Relic.]

[...Your Shadow has evolved.]

Chapter-549: Soul Beast

Sunny waited for a few moments, and then hurriedly stood up while summoning the runes. This was it… the moment he had been waiting for! After so much time, all the sweat and blood, his effort had finally paid off. He had made another step toward becoming a true battle master.

All it took was…

Sunny thought for a second, then glanced at the runes describing the Mantle of the Underworld first. Under the description of the [Prince of the Underworld] enchantment, a runic counter glowed:

Vanquished Foes: [2332/6000].

All it took was killing twelve hundred enemies with his own two hands… and dying by a Master's hand once.

Around nine hundred of those kills had happened in the Dreamscape, one in the waking world, and the rest in front of the Gate and in the wild reaches of the Chained Isles. Sadly, creatures slain by Saint did not count toward the requirement of the strange enchantment, or the number would have been even higher.

Still, it was good progress.

Turning away, Sunny found the string of runes he wanted to see the most:

Shadows: [Marble Saint], [Soul Serpent].

He concentrated on the latter and read:

Shadow: [Soul Serpent].

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

A wide grin appeared on his face. Sunny closed his eyes and listened to his soul, then circulated shadow essence through the coils of the serpent. He could feel that it was flowing even faster than before. The rate of essence expenditure and regeneration was also improved.

'Perfect!'

He had expected the process of evolving to a new Rank to take a long time, like it had happened with Saint back on the Forgotten Shore, but Soul Serpent had awakened instantly after he had reached the second level of mastery over the Shadow Dance, maybe due to its unique nature as an Aspect Legacy Relic.

'What else changed, I wonder?'

Sunny opened his eyes and looked back to the runes. He had already noticed that there were new ones in the description of the Shadow.

Shadow Attributes: [Shadow Guide], [Soul Weapon], [Soul Beast].

The [Soul Beast] wasn't there before...

He concentrated on the new Attribute and read:

Attribute Description: "Soul Serpent can assume the form of a beast."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'...What?'

He looked down at his bare chest and stared at the intricate tattoo of a black serpent that coiled around his torso and arms. Then, Sunny carefully raised one hand and gave the Shadow a mental command.

Immediately, the tattoo moved, slithering onto his palm and moving down his fingers.

However, instead of the tip of a sharp blade, a triangular head of a massive snake appeared in the air instead.

Enveloped in streaming darkness, the serpent crawled forward, leaving Sunny's skin and manifesting itself into existence. Its jet-black

scales rustled quietly as they touched the armored plates of the floor, and soon, petrified Sunny was looking at a giant snake, at least six meters in length, its body as wide as a large man's arm and strong enough to crush granite into dust.

The stygian creature coiled its long body and stretched into the air, its head slowly rising and soon reaching as high as Sunny was tall. A forked tongue flashed for a moment, and then the serpent looked him right in the eyes.

...Then, it opened its maw and hissed, revealing long, terrifying onyx fangs.

Sunny gulped.

The serpent's eyes were as black as its mighty body, and shone with dark radiance. They seemed as deep as the lightless expanse of an ocean of shadows, and were full of strange, alien intelligence.

Luckily, there was no aggression or ill will in them. Instead, there was simply… recognition.

The Shadow Serpent was greeting its master.

Sunny slowly looked away and studied the dark creature's body. Then, he sent the creepy shadow forward, and it swiftly wrapped itself around the serpent. Immediately, flowing patterns that were somehow even darker than the lusterless, obsidian scales revealed themselves, and the pressure that the shadow beast exerted instantly became much, much more frightening.

Its body had turned ghostly, enveloped in wisps of impenetrable, moving darkness.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then grinned.

"...What a good boy you are!"

Very satisfied, he glanced at the giant snake, and then patted it on the head with a delighted expression on his face.

Now, it was the mighty beast's turn to blink… if it had any eyelids.

Was Sunny imagining things, or did the obsidian serpent seem a bit startled by such treatment?

With a shrug, he glanced back at the runes, and lowered his gaze. There was one last surprise left for him to discover.

At the very bottom, several new runes appeared.

Shadow Abilities: [Serpentine Steel], [Soul Reaver].

[Soul Reaver] Ability Description: "A portion of the soul essence of those slain by the Shadow Serpent in its Soul Weapon or Soul Beast form is absorbed and transferred to its master."

Sunny's smile widened.

'Excellent! That will help with the fact that I can't use the Serpent to regenerate essence while it is not on my body. In fact, as long as it continues to kill something, my essence might never run dry!'

He glanced at the Shadow with gleaming eyes.

"You and I are going to do great things together, buddy! You'll have plenty of tasty souls to eat, don't worry!"

Saying that, Sunny opened his palm and commanded the Serpent to crawl back onto his skin. A few seconds later, the Shadow had already turned back into a tattoo and coiled itself around his body. It was as though there had never been a terrifying creature in the underground dojo, in the first place.

"Now let's take a look at that relic…"

Sunny looked at the runes and found the right cluster.

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [2/7].

First Relic: Claimed.

Second Relic: [Claim].

Third Relic: Unearned…

Concentrating on the second Relic, Sunny said confidently:

"Claim!"

For a second, nothing happened. Sunny waited, full of anticipation.

'What could it be? Another Shadow? A weapon? An armor? Maybe a charm or a tool… or something more unexpected? A new Attribute, perhaps?'

And then, answering his call, the Spell spoke from the darkness:

[You have claimed an Aspect Legacy Relic.]

[You have received a Memory.]

Sunny hurriedly glanced at the runes describing his Memories, searching for a new one.

…A moment later, when he saw it, his heart skipped a beat, and he momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Out there in the darkness of the underground dojo, several familiar runes shone with ethereal light.

They read:

Memory: [Drop of Ichor].

Chapter-550: Tournament Rewards

Sunny held his breath, staring at the runes intensely. He knew what that Memory was.

Another drop of divine blood…

And knowing where the Shadow Slave Aspect had come from and to which deity it was connected, it wasn't hard to guess whose blood it was.

Shadow God… this Memory was of a drop of Shadow God's blood.

...And in that drop was his lineage.

"Can't be…"

But it was. Sunny had just received a second Lineage Memory… more than that, that lineage was a complete one — like [The Fire] that Neph had inherited from Sun God — not a fragment of a forbidden bloodline that he had inherited from Weaver, the Demon of Fate.

Sunny studied the runes for a while, then slowly turned away.

He wasn't ready to summon the Drop of Ichor yet. Not because of the pain that consuming a Lineage Memory would bring — who knew, maybe there wasn't going to be any this time. After all, this one was not forbidden.

He simply had to prepare himself mentally.

Sunny paced for a bit, then sat down and meditated for some time.

Then, he decided to study the Memories he had received in the Tournament to distract himself.

He had already studied the Memory of Ice in detail, so three more remained.

The arrow, the shield, and the final reward he had received from Morgan… the Memory created in the forge of the Great Clan Valor.

The real reason he had joined the Dream Tournament, in the first place.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then looked at the list of his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [Mantle of the Underworld], [Weaver's Mask], [Broken Oath], [Blackhorn Bow], [Full Quiver], [Autumn Leaf], [Cruel Sight], [Covetous Coffer], [Undying Chain], [Heavenly Burden], [Memory of Fire], [Memory of Ice], [Strike of Thunder], [Patient Avenger], [Morgan's Warbow], [Drop of Ichor].

'So it's a bow… but what's up with that name?'

Well… it made sense, actually. If this was really a custom Memory created for a specific user, then why wouldn't its name fit theirs?

Sunny concentrated on the arrow first.

Memory: [Strike of Thunder].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [A powerful spirit was once trapped in a glass bottle for a thousand years. This lightning is a manifestation of his rage.]

Memory Enchantments: [Caged Lightning].

Enchantment Description: [This arrow strikes as fast as a bolt of lightning, and chains its devastating damage to several nearby creatures.]

He grunted.

'So… lightning in a bottle, huh?'

Even though the arrow's single enchantment was an active one and required a lot of essence to access, which meant that it couldn't be used often, the effect was very good. It was able to deal damage to groups of enemies, which could come in handy in many situations.

Satisfied, he shifted his gaze to the shield.

Memory: [Patient Avenger].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: III.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Aflame with hatred, she waited and watched. When the time came, her vengeance was colder than ice.]

Memory Enchantments: [Tenacious], [Burning Heart], [Cold Steel].

[Tenacious] Enchantment Description: "This shield is especially durable."

[Burning Heart] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of fire damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash a devastating shockwave."

[Cold Steel] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of impact damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash an immolating wave of fire."

'Huh…'

Sunny thought for a bit. So, this shield was basically able to convert

heat to kinetic energy, and vice versa. The stored energy could be used to enhance another weapon or released all at once to deliver a powerful attack. Which meant that the more hits the shield received, the more devastating the resulting retaliation would be.

Saint was long overdue for a good shield Memory, and this one would suit her very well. A weak smile appeared on Sunny's face.

'And finally… the main prize…'

He sighed, then concentrated on the bow he had received from Ascended Morgan of clan Valor. He also summoned it.

A composite bow made out of black horn and dark polished wood manifested itself from a storm of crimson sparks. It was entirely black, however, its string was of a vibrant scarlet color. There was also a brand carved into one of its limbs near the grip, its contour of the same color as the string. It depicted the crest of the Valor family — a straight sword thrust through an iron anvil.

The bow was quite beautiful… but more importantly, it radiated a feeling of immense power.

Sunny admired the weapon for a few moments, and then turned back to the runes:

Memory: [Morgan's Warbow].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: "Death is worth living for. Love is worth waiting for."

'How romantic... and how morbid.'

Sunny didn't know who created this description — the Spell itself or the person who had forged the bow. If it was the latter, then maybe this was a message to Morgan, or a lesson the spellsmith wanted to

impart to her.

But what kind of a lesson was that?

Curious, Sunny looked beneath the surface of the black bow, wishing to see if the spellweave of a Memory created by a human was different from that created by the Spell. However, it seemed pretty much the same — vast, inconceivably complex, and eerily beautiful.

In any case, he was excited to see that this Memory was of the fourth tier. It was powerful, indeed… no less powerful than the Cruel Sight. Encouraged, he continued to read the runes.

Memory Enchantments: [Soul Arrows], [Unbending], [Burden of Peace], [Death Dealer].

'Four enchantments… first two are passive, the other two are active. Not bad…'

He concentrated on the first enchantment.

[Soul Arrows] Enchantment Description: "This bow attunes to the soul of its wielder and is capable of creating arrows that share its affinity."

[Unbending] Enchantments Description: "This adamantine bow demands a giant's might to be bent. Because of that, arrows shot from it travel as far as the eye can see, and strike with terrible strength, piercing both armor and flesh."

The passive enchantments were not bad, to say the least. Sunny wasn't sure what arrows that shared the affinity of his soul could do, but the fact that the bow itself could produce an unlimited amount of arrows was already a great boon. It basically made the Full Quiver, his previous arrow-type Memory, pale in comparison and completely redundant.

Each of the soul arrows would also share the tier and Rank of the Warbow that created them, which was simply incredible.

To test it, Sunny grabbed the string and tried to draw the warbow. Even with all his strength, Sunny was only able to do it after

augmenting himself with two shadows. As soon as the string moved, a black arrow that looked as if it was made out of solidified shadows suddenly appeared on it.

Sunny released the string, and in the next moment, one of the armored plates on the opposite wall exploded.

'Crap!'

He stared at the broken plate dejectedly, then sighed and looked back to the runes.

[Burden of Peace] Enchantment Description: "After soul arrows pierce the flesh of an enemy, their weight can be drastically increased."

'Interesting…'

Sunny could already think of several useful applications for this enchantment, be it to make wounds dealt by the arrows more severe or simply to slow the enemy down.

There was one last string of runes left:

[Death Dealer] Enchantment Description: "This bow is able to consume a large amount of essence to deliver an obliterating strike."

That sounded... ominous.

Sunny was curious to know how obliterating exactly that strike was supposed to be, but he was not going to test it in his dojo. It already suffered enough.

Morgan's Warbow… was indeed a weapon worthy of an Ascended knight from a Great Clan. It was a truly formidable and versatile weapon. In any other circumstance, Sunny would have been mad from joy after receiving it.

And he was… sort of...

But there was one more Memory he had to deal with.

It was time. He couldn't postpone it anymore.

Sunny glanced at the beautiful bow for the last time, then sighed and dismissed it.

As soon as the flood of scarlet sparks disappeared, he summoned the Drop of Ichor.

Chapter-551: Slave's Inheritance

The underground dojo was submerged in darkness, and as soon as Sunny willed the drop of ichor to manifest itself into reality, that darkness suddenly came to life. Countless shadows moved and danced around him, forming an invisible whirlpool. Their movements were strange and erratic, fraught with anticipation, excitement, and longing.

Slowly, golden sparks of light appeared in the air in front of him and then shot toward a single point in space, coalescing into a small radiant dot. However, the Memory did not appear yet.

Instead, more and more sparks flew into it, thousands upon thousands of them, until, at last, it seemed as though wide streams of brilliant golden light were constantly flowing into the slowly growing sphere of radiance.

This continued for almost an entire minute, and when the sparks finally disappeared, a brilliant drop of golden liquid was floating in the air in front of Sunny. It was suffused with a beautiful light that didn't seem blinding, but was somehow able to illuminate the entire expanse of the dojo.

…However, there was also something dark about the shining drop of divine blood. Contrasted against its golden radiance, the shadows around him were now suddenly much deeper, darker, and starkly pronounced. All their movement ceased, as though they were frozen still by awe and reverence.

'...That is Shadow God's blood, alright.'

Sunny forced himself to look away from the Drop of Ichor and summoned the runes describing it. He had to make sure that his guess was right.

Tense with anticipation, he read:

Memory: [Drop of Ichor].

Memory Rank: unknown

Memory Tier: unknown

Memory Type: unknown

'Just like the last time…'

Not surprised, he lowered his gaze and studied the string of runes that were his real goal:

Memory Description: [Before, there was only boundless, eternal void. From that dark abyss, the -unknown- were born. Just like chaos itself, they were endless and everlasting, vast and forever changing. But then came desire, and with it came direction. From it, the gods were born.

When gods appeared, the void was not eternal anymore.

When gods appeared, the darkness was not endless anymore.

When gods appeared, the chaos was not orderless anymore.

The gods appeared, and brought with them war. This drop of divine blood was spilled by Shadow on one of the battlefields of that war, before the void was bound.]

Sunny stared at the runes, flabbergasted.

That was… a lot to take in.

'So… unlike the Unknown, the -unknown- were indeed a type of creatures. Primordial beings that existed before time, space, and even death itself, in a boundless dark void. And the gods were… different from them. But also their kin?'

At least it was clear now what terrible enemy the gods had faced long before the daemons and their rebellion. And why Shadow God had

been compelled to create Death. How else would they be able to defeat eternal creatures? Were time, space, and other concepts Sunny had always thought to be absolute also created as weapons in the war of the gods against the -unknown-?

At least it was easy to tell which side had emerged victorious. However...

The most frightening detail was that the description never said that the primordial void had been destroyed. Only that it had been "bound".

...Was it still bound, now that the gods were dead?

Sunny shivered and shook his head. The short description contained a vast amount of information, which had an even vaster amount of implications. He couldn't encompass all that in a small span of time.

'Maybe after I consume the drop, I'll learn more.'

He hesitated, then glanced at the radiant drop of golden liquid once again.

Immediately, the Spell spoke. This time, however, its voice did not sound subtly excited.

'Weird...'

[You have acquired a drop of ichor. Do you wish to consume it?]

Sunny sighed, remembering the agony of the previous two times he had decided to snack on a piece of divinity. Then, he gritted his teeth and said:

"Yes."

[...So be it.]

'What is that supposed to…'

The golden drop suddenly separated into three equal parts, which then shot toward his chest, abdomen, and head. The radiant droplets

entered his three Shadow Cores and disappeared, dissolving into the darkness of his soul.

Sunny flinched.

'A—already?'

The shadows surrounding him exploded with motion, and at the same time, the darkness inside of him seethed.

He felt something entering his bloodstream, a cold and unfamiliar energy that brought with it both pain and euphoria.

'This… this is it! It's starting!'

He lowered himself to the floor, preparing for the torturous process of transformation. The cold energy spread through his entire body, reaching every corner of it. It surged, on the cusp of assimilating into the very essence of his being…

And then, something strange happened.

Sunny opened his eyes wide in shock and horror.

As the lineage of Shadow God flowed through his veins, Blood Weave suddenly surged, too. But its behavior was not at all normal, or caused by Sunny himself. It was acting of its own volition, and felt full of ominous, dark intent.

…And hunger.

'What?!'

He was prepared for indescribable pain, but the pain never came. Instead, he could feel the cold energy being hungrily and ruthlessly devoured by the Blood Weave, like it had been starving for thousands of years.

'What the hell is happening?!'

A sudden spasm ran through his body, and Sunny fell down with a short yelp.

Inside of him, two forces were fighting for control over his very being. One was the lineage of Shadow God, and the other was Blood Weave. And despite the fact that one was complete and came from an actual divinity, while the other was fragmented and incomplete… the forbidden inheritance of Weaver was winning.

It was like a savage beast that sunk its teeth into the soft flesh of its prey and refused to let go.

'Stop! What are you...'

…And before he knew it, it was all over.

The cold energy of Shadow God's lineage was gone, and Blood Weave was back to its usual self, peaceful once again, as if nothing had happened.

Peaceful, but yet… stronger.

As Sunny stared into the darkness in absolute shock, there was no announcement of him acquiring a new Attribute.

Instead, the Spell said with a hint of dark satisfaction in its voice:

[Blood Weave has evolved.]

[Bone Weave has evolved.]

[Ember of Divinity has evolved.]

[...Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny remained silent for a long time, and then let out a furious, outraged scream:

"...Weaver! You bastard!"

Chapter-552: September

…The autumn was in full swing. Out in the waking world, the skies were grey and the winds were turning cold. The trees were showering the wet ground with a fragrant carpet of dead leaves.

But under the boundless, lethal expanse of the Sky Above, the world was still warm and bright. On an especially large island, one covered with emerald grass and moss-covered ruins, a frightening Nightmare Creature was stalking its prey.

It had four mighty paws, a lean body covered in black fur, and a wide maw full of sharp fangs. Above it, two furious red eyes burned with hatred and madness.

The abomination noiselessly moved through the tall grass, approaching the source of loud noise. A human's voice was screaming, full of indignation:

"I'm right here! Come and get me, damned bastards! Curse you all!"

The creature snarled and prepared to jump.

…Before it could, however, a slender arrow fell from the sky and hit the abomination right in the eye, instantly killing it.

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Black Ravager.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Several hundred meters away, safely hidden in the shadows cast by a fragment of an ancient wall, Sunny lowered his bow and frowned.

The happy shadow jumped up and down several times, then turned to him and applauded.

Sunny looked at it, his frown turning into a scowl.

"What do you mean, great shot? I was aiming for its leg, you idiot!"

Dejectedly shaking his head, he threw the bow on the ground and growled.

…It had been almost two months since the day he had gained — and promptly lost — the lineage of Shadow God, but Sunny's mood was still in shambles.

He had spent most of this time training Rain and learning how to use a bow. By now, his aim wasn't terrible, but it was also not nearly as impressive as what he had seen Kai do. The fact that his archery was improving so slowly only added to Sunny's frustration.

He wasn't using Morgan's Warbow, of course, reluctant to be seen with a Memory awarded to Mongrel — even if no one except for the terrifying Master knew what exactly that Memory was, people could recognize the brand of clan Valor on its surface, which would lead to a lot of questions.

Instead, Sunny was training with the Blackhorn Bow, which Saint had used to wield back when he had been too weak to handle Nightmare Creatures populating the Chained Isles without her support.

Sunny stared at the bow in question and suppressed the desire to give it a good kick. Dismissing it with a sigh, he retrieved the Cruel Sight from where it had been thrust into the ground and headed in the direction of the slain abomination.

Compared to when he had just arrived on the Chained Isles, Sunny was much stronger now. He had a vastly better arsenal of Memories at his disposal, an additional Shadow Core and a third shadow, and his combat mastery was polished by hundreds upon hundreds of bloody battles.

Additionally, after the damned and forbidden — rightfully so! — lineage of Weaver had swallowed the drop of Shadow God's blood, three of his Attributes evolved. The [Ember of Divinity] was now [Flame of Divinity], raising his divine affinity even more, which also increased the durability of the Undying Chain.

Blood Weave and Bone Weave had not changed in name, but became much more potent. Sunny was now much harder to break and kill. He probably couldn't bleed to death even if he wanted to, and it would take a Saint… or someone like Master Morgan… to shatter his bones again.

That was something, at least…

Commanding the Ordinary Rock to shut up, he picked it up from the ground, hid it on his belt, and walked over to the carcass of the Black Ravager.

The creepy shadow slowly turned its head and stared at the carcass with disturbing fascination.

'This guy…'

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Don't just stand there, pervert, come here and help."

The shadow eagerly wrapped itself around the blade of the Prowling Thorn, which was then used to cut the tough hide of the dead Nightmare Creature.

Sunny swiftly fished out the soul shard and threw it to the Covetous Coffer, which hopped into the air and swallowed it with a metallic click. Usually, that would be it, but today Sunny needed to retrieve something else as well. Grimacing from time to time, he cut several large slabs of meat off the carcass, wrapped them, and threw the bundle over his shoulder.

"Should be enough… right?"

Finally done with the gruesome task, he stood up, picked up the Cruel Sight, and headed toward the southern edge of the large island.

This island was a bit special, and for a good reason.

Once Sunny reached its end, he saw a breathtaking sight.

Far away and below him, the scattering of floating isles was no more.

Instead, solid ground stretched as far as the eye could see, covered by a patchwork of forests, meadows, marshes, rolling hills, and glistening ribbons of rushing rivers.

A dark, bottomless abyss stretched between the edge of the island and the rest of the Dream Realm, and those rivers fell into it, creating grandiose waterfalls.

Near to where he stood, a ruined fortress rose from the ground, and from its gates, a colossal iron chain — many times thicker than the giant chains connecting the isles together — extended into the abyss, connecting to the soil on the other side of the dark chasm.

This was one of the anchors of the Chained Isles, and the road by which Awakened traveled here from the lands to the south, which belonged to the Great Clan Valor… as much as anything could belong to humans in this realm of nightmares.

Sunny glanced at the sun, then got busy making a fire.

By the time strips of meat were roasting over the coals, two figures finally appeared on the colossal chain.

A small smile appeared on Sunny's face — one of the few sincere ones he had shown in the past two months.

…Effie and Kai had finally reached the Chained Isles.

Now, all of them were here.

Chapter-553: Gracious Host

Effie and Kai climbed over the rubble of the shattered gateway and entered the crumbled fortress. Both were tired and covered in layers of dirt, their armors dented and their weapons nicked. The travel to the very edge of the explored lands had not been easy.

Even though they had made stops and rested at human Citadels along the way, it took a lot of strength, endurance, resolve, and a bit of luck to reach the Chained Isles alive.

However, both Raised by Wolves and Nightingale were calm and vigilant, their eyes sharp, their hands steady. They were ready to face any danger… luckily, there were no enemies inside the ruin.

Instead, several Nightmare Creatures lay dead on the ground, some of them cut to pieces, some strangely lacking any wounds, but utterly broken — as though something terrifyingly powerful had crushed their bodies with inhuman strength.

The shadows suddenly moved, and a split second later, Kai already had his bow drawn. However, Effie gestured for him to lower it.

Out of the shadows, a tall and graceful figure in elaborate black armor stepped out, two ruby flames shining behind the visor of her helmet. In one hand, she wielded a steadfast kite shield forged out of dull steel, and in the other, an austere sword, its blade still dripping with rancid blood of the slaughtered abominations.

Kai cautiously studied the menacing creature.

"Is that Sunny's Echo? She looks… different?"

Effie grinned.

"Yeah… she does that sometimes. Hey there, beautiful! Where's your

sneaky boyfr... I mean, master?"

The taciturn demon tilted her head a little, stared at Effie for a few moments, then silently turned around and walked away.

"...I guess we should follow."

The three of them left the crumbling fortress and walked along the edge of the island. Soon, the heavenly smell of roasting meat reached their nostrils.

A few seconds later, both Effie and Kai froze, their mouths hanging open.

A firepit was built in the shadow of an ancient wall, strips of juicy, generously seasoned meat roasting over the coals.

But that was not all.

There were also fresh vegetables and succulent fruits, a copper cezve producing the unmistakable smell of freshly brewed coffee, and a few more things that people very rarely saw in the Dream Realm.

The person responsible for all this revelry was sitting in a comfortable folding chair, lazily enjoying a slice of melon.

When he saw them, an impish smile appeared on his face.

"Oh, hi guys! You finally made it!"

With that, the young man jumped out of the chair, reached into a pot full of ice, and then placed two frosty bottles of cold, expensive beer into their hands.

Sunny grinned.

"Welcome to the Chained Isles!"

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Some time later, Effie and Kai had satiated their hunger and were resting with dreamy expressions on their faces. Sunny had given up

his folding chair and was now sitting on the ground. He was inwardly lamenting the fact that Covetous Coffer was not large enough on the inside to fit several... at least not yet. Maybe after he becomes a Master, things would be different.

Kai took a sip of his beer and glanced at the branded bottle in his hand with a funny expression.

"Sunny… how do you even have all this stuff? Are you on such good terms with the White Feather clan?"

Sunny laughed.

"Nope, I delivered all these things here myself. What, you have forgotten about my Brilliant Emporium already? It seems that Aiko had not hounded you for an endorsement hard enough… or maybe too hard, and you're suffering from trauma-induced amnesia? I mean, you are basically a co-founder! The first deal I ever made was with your help, remember?"

Kai smiled.

"Those terrible Memories you asked me to buy on your behalf in the Castle? Yeah, I do."

Sunny nodded with enthusiasm.

"My operation might seem small compared to what you two have seen in Bastion, but here on the Chained Island, I am the most successful entrepreneur. I guess it's true what they say about business… you know. You have to find the right people in the right wells. Or something like that."

The charming archer blinked a couple of times, but didn't comment.

Effie, on the other hand, did. Finishing her beer, she glanced at the empty bottle with regret and sighed.

"Sunny, I have a serious question… think about it before answering… take your time, too. Will you marry me? No, seriously! I am reformed. I swear I won't tease you anymore… I won't even mind you having a girlfriend! Just continue supplying me with all this stuff!"

He sneered.

"No. Denied. You shameless gold digger."

Effie made a disappointed face, then threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Oh, well. Alright then."

Then, she grew a little bit more serious and asked:

"So, what's the plan? How do we proceed from here?"

Sunny sighed, then took out his map of the Chained Isles and placed it on the grass.

Effie and Kai got closer and studied it attentively.

He pointed to the southernmost point on the map and said:

"We are here. First things first, we need to get you to the Sanctuary of Noctis, which is about three days of traveling away, and get you anchored there. White Feather clan patrols this route routinely, so we shouldn't run into anything too troublesome."

Then, he pointed at a particular island marked with an image of a burned tree.

"After you are settled, we'll go check up on the Fire Keepers and their progress on the ship. They won't be finished repairing that thing for at least a month more, from what I've heard, so you'll have to spend that time well. Hunt, saturate your cores as much as you can, search for better equipment."

Effie nodded.

"What about you and Cassie? Are you well prepared?"

Sunny hesitated, then nodded.

"I am reasonably prepared. Cassie… I don't know. But the two of us have another task to accomplish before the ship is ready to set sail."

He pointed to the very north of the Chained Isles, to a dark island that was almost touching the foreboding slopes of the Hollow Mountains.

"There is something we need to retrieve from the Night Temple. If all goes well, we'll travel north and come back within a month. If it takes longer, we will rendezvous here."

His finger landed on the Shipwreck Island.

"...And challenge the Seed. That's the gist of it. Don't worry, though, we'll talk everything through in detail before Cassie and I leave."

Effie and Kai glanced at each other.

"Sounds like a plan."

Sunny nodded, then glanced at the setting sun.

"Good. Rest well tonight, then. We'll set off in the morning."

...Winter was drawing closer and closer.

And the closer it got, the more nervous he became.

Chapter-554: Coming Clean

On the way back to the Sanctuary, Sunny tried to impart as much knowledge about the Chained Isles as he could to Kai and Effie.

The archer, in particular, needed to go through a tough adjustment. His main combat tool was his ability to fly, which was obviously restricted in this strange land.

Looking at the clear blue sky with a bit of trepidation, Kai asked:

"So… that Crushing. How deadly is it?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Deadly enough to kill a Saint. But it is also situational. After a bit, you'll develop a sense of how high or low the island you're standing on is. When it is at its lowest point, like right now, you will probably be able to rise several hundred meters into the air before feeling any pressure. The exact margin depends on how long the chains of the island are."

He paused, then continued:

"However, when it is ascending or descending, you'd better either stay on the ground or not fly more than a dozen meters up. And if it has already reached the peak… well, you really should have already escaped to another island. But if you failed to do that in time, lay on the ground and pray. If the chains are short enough, you will survive."

Kai studied the Sky Above some more, then looked down.

"What about below the islands? Can I fly freely there?"

Sunny nodded.

"Theoretically, yes. The Sky Below is generally safe, there's just nothing there. But that is only true for its depths… the underside of the islands is actually much more dangerous than their surface. The creatures that dwell there are the true horrors of this place. Some of them stay put, some move through the darkness as they hunt and migrate between islands.

So flying under the islands is lethal in its own way."

…Effie was less concerned with the Crushing, since her mighty constitution allowed her to withstand it on par with someone like Master Roan or Sunny himself. She was, however, very interested in all the kinds of Nightmare Creatures that populated the region. The huntress was determined to finish saturating her core in the month left before their departure.

Sunny shared all the knowledge he had about the inhabitants of the Chained Isles. He had spent many months fighting local abominations, so he knew a lot — which creatures frequented which island, how they attacked their prey, what their weaknesses were, and so on. He also knew which islands had to be avoided at all costs.

By the end of their journey, even Effie seemed impressed by the amount of knowledge he had accumulated.

"I, uh… I guess the Academy doesn't pay you for nothing. You really did do a lot of research."

Sunny grinned.

"When I hunt Nightmare Creatures, I get to sell their shards, and also get paid by the research faculty. So much money! Aint't it a dream?"

She giggled.

"The wonderful thing about you, Sunny, is that you are very easy to please…"

'Uh... what is that supposed to mean?"

Effie, meanwhile, looked east and asked with a bit of tension:

"What about the Saint who rules this region? What's your opinion of her?"

Sunny thought for a bit, then said with uncertainty:

"Sky Tide… she is a bit of a recluse. I don't really know. But her husband is a really decent guy, so that earned her some points in my book."

Effie smiled lightly and didn't continue the conversation.

…On the third day, they finally reached the Sanctuary.

Due to how high-profile both Raised by Wolves and Nightingale were, the trio was invited to have a meal with Saint Tyris before visiting the Gateway.

The dinner was pleasant enough, but when the plates turned empty, the real conversation began.

Saint Tyris looked at Effie and Kai with her usual expressionless severity and asked:

"I was surprised to hear that two more of the most brilliant Awakened of the new generation had decided to visit my remote and unremarkable Citadel. If you forgive my bluntness… to what do I owe the pleasure?"

The three of them glanced at each other. They had discussed what to say in advance… at this point, there was no reasonable way to keep their intention secret, so it was easier to just let the cat out of the bag.

Kai smiled politely before answering.

…That smile of his was charming enough to make a crowd of women faint on the spot, but Sky Tide did not even blink.

"We came here with the intention of challenging a Nightmare Seed. Sunny… Awakened Sunless discovered one not too long ago. Since the Seed is years away from blooming and doesn't pose a threat to the waking world at the moment, he didn't inform you… please

forgive him that transgression."

Master Roan frowned.

"There is a Seed on the Chained Isles? Where?"

Effie pointed down.

"To reach it, we'll have to descend into the depths of the Sky Below. Song of the Fallen will also be joining us. We plan to use that ancient ship the Fire Keepers are repairing."

Roan blinked a couple of times.

"Well... how extravagant. At least that explains a few things, I guess?"

Saint Tyris lingered for a few moments, then asked evenly:

"Are you sure that you want to enter a Second Nightmare? It has been less than a year since the four of you Awakened. Most people take much more time to prepare for the rigors of the Spell's trial. And even then, many don't survive."

A wild smile appeared on Effie's face.

"Sure? Yes, I guess we are sure, as much as anyone can be. The decision to challenge the Seed was not made rashly, nor was it based on blind ambition. You are right, of course, but the circumstance of our Awakening was not ordinary. Even though it only happened recently, between the four of us, we already share a decade of battle experience. And the battles we fought were not soft."

Sky Tide did not answer immediately, turning her face away to look at the vista of the Chained Isles.

Kai cleared his throat.

"Are you going to try and dissuade us, my lady?"

Tyris remained silent for a few moments, then slowly shook her head.

"...No. If four Awakened with the SSA designation want to challenge

a Nightmare Seed, they must know what they're doing. Your timing… is actually good, as well."

Sunny frowned slightly.

'Good timing? What does she mean?'

But Sky Tide wasn't going to elaborate. Instead, she looked at Effie and asked:

"When do you leave?"

The huntress shrugged.

"Cassie and Sunny have an errand to run in the Night Temple. So, we'll depart as soon as they return."

Tyris shifted her gaze to Sunny. Was he imagining things, or did her expression become darker?

"You are going to the Night Temple, Sunless?"

He nodded.

"Yes. It is a part of our preparations… why?"

The beautiful Saint remained silent for a few moments, then said simply:

"Be careful to strictly follow the rules while you're there."

Sunny politely agreed.

Inwardly, though, he was a bit disturbed.

'Well, that… did not sound ominous at all…'

Cassie, too, had seemed a bit apprehensive about the Night Temple.

Just what kind of a place was it?

Chapter-555: Best Served Cold

A few days later, a delicious aroma was slowly spreading through Sunny's home. He was currently in the kitchen area of the first floor, whistling an upbeat tune as his hands juggled several cooking utensils. There were several pans and pots simmering on the stove, and a scattering of fresh ingredients on the countertops around him.

"Ah, this smells so good…"

Taking a step to the side, he produced a strange knife out of nowhere and started slicing and dicing the vegetables, the triangular blade moving so fast that it turned into a blur.

Rain, who was tasked with peeling the potatoes, gave him a long and dark look.

"Sunny… not to doubt your honesty and professional integrity, but how exactly is this a part of my training? Are you sure you're not just using me as cheap labor? No, wait… it's not even cheap, I am actually paying you!"

Without stopping what he was doing, Sunny looked at her and frowned.

"Why, of course! I am very sure. Also, is this how you handle a blade? By gods, you just sliced half of that poor potato off and threw it into the sink! It's called peeling, not destroying, you know! Where's your finesse?

Where's your precision? Control that knife better! These things are very expensive!"

Rain stared at him with burning resentment for a few moments, then sighed heavily and continued peeling the potatoes. Sunny grinned.

Effie, who was watching him cook with a wolfish expression, gulped.

"So, uh… it's not ready yet?"

His eyes twitched.

"...Forty seconds, damn it. That's how long ago you asked the same question. For the hundredth time. What do you think changed since then?!"

Effie opened her mouth to retort, but at that moment, the doorbell rang.

A sadistic light suddenly gleamed in Sunny's eyes.

"Oh. I wonder who can it be."

He glanced at Rain and said nonchalantly:

"Rain, go see who it is."

The teenage girl blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, wiped her hands on her apron, and glared at him.

"What, I am your doorman now, too?!"

Grumbling, she put the knife down and went to the door, then opened it.

Sunny observed her with keen interest.

Rain looked up, revealing that the unexpected visitor was quite tall… and then suddenly froze.

Her face paled so much that it turned almost entirely white, and her pupils became as wide as saucers. Her mouth hung open. It was as though the girl was paralyzed by horror.

Sunny weighted the heavy kunai in his hand and walked over.

As he walked, a strange sound escaped Rain's mouth.

"N… n… n…"

A tall and ridiculously attractive young man was standing on the porch, looking at her with a polite and friendly smile. His hair was auburn and absolutely gorgeous, and his electric green eyes were nothing short of stunning. He was dressed in simple, but exquisitely stylish clothes, holding fashionable sunglasses and a facemask in one of his hands.

"Oh… I am so sorry. I must have come to the wrong house."

Even his voice was charming and velvety, causing one's ears to tingle.

Rain was finally able to force out a word, her voice a panicked squeal:

"N—Night!"

Sunny gave her a short look, shook his head, then smiled at Kai.

"Hyung! You're here! Sorry, the dinner isn't even ready yet… come on in, come on in!"

Kai returned his smile and came inside.

Sunny raised a hand and poked Rain in the back, then narrowed his eyes and said with exasperation.

"Rain, why are you just standing there? Get my hyung some slippers quick!"

Then, he turned to Kai and sighed.

"So sorry. That's Rain, a girl I tutor. She is a bit slow, sometimes."

Kai glanced at her, two lethally cute dimples appearing on his cheeks.

"I am sure that is not true. It is very nice to meet you, Rain."

She opened her mouth, trying to say something, but no words came out of her mouth.

Sunny waited for a couple of moments, then shook his head again and bent down to push a pair of house shoes to Kai.

"Make yourself at home! This is the living room. I'll be over there in the kitchen area for a bit, but please, for the love of gods, can you distract Effie? She's driving me crazy."

Kai laughed, patted him on the shoulder, and went in to greet the hungry huntress.

Sunny and Rain were momentarily left alone.

The teenage girl breathed heavily for a few moments, then slowly looked down, at her dirty apron and hands with pieces of potato peel stuck to them. An expression of utter horror appeared on her face.

Then, she looked at him with wide eyes and whispered:

"Sunny… why is N—n… N-n… why is Night in your house?!"

He blinked a couple of times, pretending to not understand the question.

"...What do you mean? Kai is a dear friend of mine. We're practically brothers, one might say! What's wrong with you today?"

Sunny shook his head in derision. Rain stared at him in shock, then opened her mouth to say something.

However, before she could, the doorbell rang again.

Sunny calmly opened the door, revealing a petite, exquisitely beautiful young woman standing on the porch. She had delicate features, pale blond hair, and stunning blue eyes. Despite the fact that the young woman was dressed humbly, there was an aura about her that made it almost impossible to look away.

It was as though she was a pristine heavenly creature that had somehow found her way to the dirty, imperfect mundane world.

In her hand, she was holding a long white cane.

Cassie hesitated for a moment, then turned her head a little, facing Sunny.

"I hope I am not late."

Rain stared at her with a ghostly expression.

"S—s… Song of the…"

Then, she turned to Sunny as well, her eyes even wider than before.

Poor thing looked as if she was about to faint.

Sunny smiled brightly.

'Ah, finally! Vengeance!'

Chapter-556: About Those Potatoes

Kai, Effie, and Cassie settled in the living room and chatted while Sunny returned to the kitchen. The two areas were basically a single space, separated only by distance and a tall counter, so he could see them clearly. Watching his friends at ease and happy to be reunited with the blind girl turned his expression dark for a short moment, but Sunny quickly put on a carefree mask.

Rain was by his side and staring at them, too.

Her gaze lingered on Kai for a while, then on Cassie. Finally, she looked at Effie and studied her face with a complicated expression.

'Here it comes!'

A few moments later, her eyes widened. Sunny didn't think that it was possible for the teenage girl to become paler than she already was, but he was proven wrong. Looking like a ghost, Rain slowly turned to him and whispered:

"Effie… she is… she's…"

Sunny offered her a polite smile.

"Huh? What are you mumbling about?"

Then, he glanced into the living room and raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, do you want me to call her over? No problem. Hey, Ef…"

Rain waved her hands and pressed one against his mouth.

"No! Don't!"

Sunny stared at her with a silent question in his eyes.

The girl looked at him, then at her hand, then awkwardly stepped back.

"What I wanted to say was… Effie, is she…"

Sunny grimaced.

"...Awakened Athena, also known as Raised by Wolves? What, you didn't know?"

Rain suddenly swayed and grabbed the counter to balance herself. A comically mortified expression appeared on her face.

Really, he couldn't blame her for not recognizing Effie. The girl wasn't that interested in the Awakened, to begin with, and the government mostly used the heroic visage of Raised by Wolves as she looked in the Dream Realm — mighty, tall, and brimming with vitality — in their propaganda.

It wasn't easy to match that image with the weak, gaunt, and sickly young woman who was bound to a wheelchair. Not to mention that a normal person would never expect to meet a famed hero in their backyard... still, looking at Rain now was incredibly funny.

"But… but she and I… oh gods, I even said… oh, no. Oh, no!"

She lowered her head, then suddenly looked up and pierced Sunny with an unexpectedly furious gaze.

"Damn it! Sunny… why are you friends with Raised by Wolves, Nightingale, and Song of the Fallen?! They are famous people!"

He frowned in confusion, then shrugged.

"So what? We used to be members of the same cohort."

Rain blinked a couple of times. Her voice became even quieter.

"But… but Song of the Fallen, Raised by Wolves, and Nightingale were members of Lady Changing Star's cohort."

Sunny smiled innocently.

"Oh? Yup, that's the one."

The girl lifelessly sat down, almost missing the chair. She remained silent for a long time, then asked slowly:

"Sunny… you know Lady Nephis? The Lady Nephis? Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan? You're from... from her cohort?"

He grinned.

"Who, Neph? Yeah, sure. I guess."

Rain closed her eyes.

Sunny did not say anything for a bit, then cleared his throat.

He waited for a few more moments, then said gently:

"So… about those potatoes…"

She flinched, looked down at her apron again, then answered weakly:

"Oh, sorry. Actually, I have to go home. I, uh… forgot to do homework. Sorry."

With that, Rain stood up and rushed to the door.

Sunny yelled at her back:

"Hey! What homework? It's Saturday!"

Without turning around, the teenage girl squealed "sorry" one more time and fled the house in a panic.

Sunny watched as the door closed behind her and laughed.

He felt avenged. He felt... wonderful!

"Ah, priceless. That was priceless… I do wish she would finish peeling the potatoes first, though…"

***

After the dinner, the four of them settled around the table and moved on to the real reason for today's gathering — the discussion of their plan to challenge the Nightmare Seed.

This conversation could have taken place in the Sanctuary, but despite having a somewhat good relationship with the White Feather clan, Sunny didn't want to say some things aloud in their territory.

Their territory was also a Sovereign's territory, after all.

So, the cohort had made plans to meet in the waking world.

There was a lot to discuss. The Second Nightmare was a deadly challenge, and they had to be as prepared to face it as possible. There were also a lot of preparations to be made for the journey to the Seed itself — venturing into the Sky Below and locating the rift in the ocean of flames that hid in its depths was not an easy task in and of itself.

So, they spent many hours going over every little detail, sharing knowledge, and finding solutions to potential problems they could encounter. The Nightmare itself was a mystery, of course, so no matter how much they tried to account for every possibility, they still had no way of knowing what awaited them inside.

All they knew was that it would be dangerous, deadly, and terrifying.

Still, there were things they could do to improve their chances. Grow stronger, improve their arsenals. But most importantly, aim for maximum flexibility in the collection of tools at their disposal. After all, it was not the strongest who survived… it was the most adaptable.

It was already deep night when the conversation stopped. It seemed as though they had discussed everything they could, at least for now.

Sunny made a pot of coffee for everyone, poured it into the cups, and sat down opposite Cassie.

"Now that everything else is settled, let's talk about the Night Temple.

The more I hear about it, the stranger I feel… isn't it supposed to be just a private Citadel of clan Valor? What's the deal with it?"

Cassie remained silent for a bit, then took a sip of coffee and sighed.

"Night Temple… how do I describe it? It is an eerie place. The first thing you need to know, I guess, is that it's actually situated on the underside of the Northern Island, and not on its surface. In the eternal shadow... that makes it harder to access, but also more defendable. I doubt that even an army of Nightmare Creatures — or Awakened, for that matter — would be able to take it by force."

She paused, and then continued:

"At first glance, it's a frontier outpost for the knights of Valor, a transfer base that was supposed to serve as a staging ground for their push further north during the active expansion of the previous decades. But, as you know, after humans encountered the Hollow Mountains, our progress in that direction stopped. Night Temple remains, though."

Sunny frowned.

"So… it's basically empty?"

Cassie lowered her head.

When she spoke, her voice sounded tense:

"Logically, it is supposed to be. But it's not."

Chapter-557: Night Temple

Cassie chose her next words carefully:

"Despite the fact that the Hollow Mountains were designated as a Death Zone, it seems that clan Valor still has ambitions of exploring them. Perhaps that is why Night Temple exists, and why a Saint is stationed there."

Sunny frowned. Even Kai and Effie seemed to be perplexed.

"...I thought Sky Tide was the only Saint on the Chained Isles."

The blind girl shook her head.

"No, there is another. Saint Cormac. He oversees the Citadel and ventures into the mist of the Hollow Mountains from time to time... as though searching for something. In fact, that was how I was able to receive permission to anchor myself and my cohort in the Night Temple. In exchange, I was meant to use my Aspect to aid him in the exploration.

But nothing much came of it."

Sunny thought for a bit, then said:

"So far, everything sounds reasonable?"

Cassie nodded, then shifted uncomfortably.

"Yeah. But there are just too many strange things about that Citadel, ones that have nothing to do with the Saint and his mission. For one, there are just too many Awakened there — around a hundred, I think. That is much more than is needed to support one Saint. However, the most eerie part is not their number, but who those Awakened are."

She hesitated, then said somberly:

"With the exception of two Masters who serve as Saint Cormac's lieutenants, all of them are… Lost."

Sunny perked up.

What Cassie had told them was, indeed, strange… and more than a little bit disturbing. There weren't that many Lost among the Awakened, so why would a hundred of them be gathered together in a remote and isolated Citadel?

But that wasn't the reason why Sunny was suddenly excited. Leaning forward a bit, he asked:

"Oh, yeah? Is there one called Mordret?"

Cassie thought for a few moments, then shook her head.

"...I don't know. We weren't really allowed to interact with the Lost while living in the Night Temple. You see, the whole Citadel is separated into three areas. The outward ring is where we were given a space to establish a base. We were forbidden from entering the temple itself, unless escorted by one of the Masters. That is where the Lost live and the Gateway is situated."

She suddenly fell silent, and then added in a darker tone:

"...But there is another area inside the temple, too. One that even the Lost aren't allowed to enter. The Inner Sanctum. One time, while we were entering the Gateway, I felt the doors of the Sanctum open, and accidentally glimpsed the people guarding it."

The blind girl shivered.

"Or at least, they seemed like people. But they weren't. They were all Echoes… human Echoes."

Sunny scowled.

'What the hell?'

One human Echo was creepy enough, but many? What exactly were they guarding that actual humans couldn't?

No… that wasn't important. Clan Valor could keep its secrets. He just needed to get the knife from the altar.

"So… what about an altar? Have you perceived an ivory knife lying on it?"

Cassie lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"The Gateway in the Night Temple is different from the one in the Sanctuary. You don't need to touch the altar to activate it. So I've only felt the altar from afar… it is indeed cut from a slab of black stone, from what others told me. There is a statue of a veiled woman holding a star and a bolt of lightning behind it. Other than that, I can't say."

Sunny sighed, a bit disappointed.

'Well, doesn't matter. I'm sure it's there… the problem is to convince the representatives of clan Valor to let me approach the altar. Or even sneak to it when no one is looking."

"Do you think you'll be able to convince them to let me inside?"

The blind girl nodded, but there was a bit of uncertainty on her face.

"I think there won't be a problem. Although I wasn't able to help Saint Cormac a lot, we parted on good terms. However… that whole place is very mysterious. I am reasonably sure that they will at least allow us to anchor ourselves to the Gateway, but…"

Sunny didn't like the sound of that.

"But what?"

Cassie sighed.

"Performing a ritual over the altar is another matter entirely. They can also simply refuse to let us in. I doubt that this will happen, but just in case, we should be prepared — the day we leave the Sanctuary

might be the last time we'll have access to a Gateway before the Second Nightmare is over."

Sunny grimaced.

Although he hated to admit it, she was right. It was best to prepare for the worst… he had a few things to do in the next few days, then.

"Alright. Then we will leave in two days. Make your preparations, and I will make mine."

Cassie nodded and fell quiet.

In that silence, a strange sound could be heard. Sunny turned around and saw Effie noisily devouring the leftovers of their recent dinner. Noticing that he was staring at her, the huntress froze.

"...What? You guys were busy, and I was hungry."

He covered his eyes for a moment, then shook his head.

'This woman...'

Speaking of preparations, he had to do something right now.

"Hey, Kai. Come here and give me your hand."

Kai looked at him with a silent question, but didn't ask anything. He stood up and walked over, then stretched one hand over with a smile.

Sunny put one finger on it and sent two Memories away with a regretful sigh — the Blackhorn Bow and the Full Quiver. Effie was well-equipped with powerful Memories from her time on the Forgotten Shore and from the months she had spent hunting as an Awakened, but the charming archer lacked good armaments.

Even though it pained Sunny to let go of two Ascended Memories, he knew that this was for the best. It was going to give Kai an opportunity to grow stronger in the next month and be better prepared for the Nightmare… plus, he still had Morgan's Warbow and the Strike of Thunder.

Kai frowned in confusion, then stared into emptiness, clearly reading the runes. Then, an excited light ignited in his eyes.

"Oh… thank you, Sunny!"

Sunny scowled.

"Now, don't get me wrong! This is not a gift. I am lending them to you… lending, you understand? Brilliant Emporium is a respectable business, not a charity! I'll be expecting a full repayment or an exchange of equal value. In the future.

Got it?"

Kai beamed and looked at him with a wide smile.

"Aww. That's so sweet..."

Sunny's scowl deepened.

'Sweet? What does he mean, sweet?! What's wrong with this idiot… I just told him that he's now in debt…'

The sun was already rising, and that meant that they had to part ways. Each had a lot of things to do.

When everyone left, Sunny stared at the table full of empty plates for a while, and then sighed.

Somehow, he felt that they won't be able to have a nice dinner like this for a while.

Chapter-558: One Last Lesson

It was already morning, so he didn't bother going to sleep and just brewed himself more coffee, poured it into a cup, and went to sit on the porch.

The mental fatigue of the long planning session made his thoughts a bit slow, but Sunny knew that he would be able to remain awake and lucid for a couple more days without any problem. He wasn't going to return to the Dream Realm until all his business in the waking world was taken care of.

So, Sunny just rested for a bit, watching the dawn and unhurriedly thinking through all the things that had to be done.

"...say goodbye to Teacher Julius… talk to Aiko about the Emporium…"

The Second Nightmare could take a lot of time to conquer, so there was a question of how long the supply of soul shards he had given her would last. Sunny didn't want to return and discover that his store had closed doors and lost all its clients.

He took a sip of coffee and looked down.

…Of course, there was a very real possibility that he would not return at all.

Sunny did not delude himself. No matter how powerful he was and how swift his progress had been, this Nightmare was going to be nothing except for absolutely deadly… like all Nightmares were. Better people than him had ventured inside and never returned. The possibility of death was very real...

Was there even a point in planning for the future?

As he thought about it, suddenly, a sound of light steps could be heard on the path leading to the porch. Sunny smiled a little, and then looked up.

Rain was standing a few steps away, looking at him with a bit of awkwardness.

"I, uh… are your guests still here?"

He shook his head.

"Good! I mean… bad? I just wanted to talk to you… alone… that's all."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? What about?"

Despite the fact that Rain was obviously trying to be apologetic and respectful, a familiar angry light ignited in her eyes.

"You know what about! I mean, uh… sorry…"

She stumbled, remained silent for a few moments, and then asked in a more polite tone:

"...Why didn't you tell me that you are a big deal?"

Sunny stared at Rain for a bit, then smiled:

"Have I not told you that I am probably the strongest Awakened in the world, the best of best, and all that? I think it happened right here on this spot."

Rain scowled.

"I'm being serious!"

Sunny took a sip of coffee and looked at her for a few moments. Slowly, the smile disappeared from his face. Finally, he sighed and looked away.

"Because I'm not. As far as Awakened go, I am not a big deal at all. In

fact, I am very small, and easily squashed. So I don't like to advertise my prowess. It's best that everyone thinks of me as weak and stupid. That way, I'll be much harder to kill."

Rain's looked at him in confusion.

"I… I don't understand. How would Nightmare Creatures know that you are considered strong? Why would that put your life in danger?"

A dark, sad smile appeared on Sunny's face. He glanced at Rain, and then asked:

"Who said anything about the Nightmare Creatures?"

Sunny put his cup on the floor, then said:

"After you left, you must have searched the network for all the information about the Forgotten Shore you could find, right?"

Rain blushed, and then nodded.

He nodded, too.

"Then you must know that around four hundred Sleepers died during the Siege of the Crimson Spire. So many. But do you know how many were killed in the months before? Almost twice that."

Her eyes widened slightly.

Sunny looked at the young girl, no levity in his voice anymore.

"And they weren't killed by the Nightmare Creatures. They were killed by people. So, ironically, more humans were killed by other humans while I was out there, in that hell, than they were by monsters. Well… other monsters, to be precise. And that is a lesson you are going to have to learn, if you want to become strong."

He sighed.

"I can teach you how to hold a sword or a spear, how to traverse the Dream Realm and not starve, and how to kill your enemies. But I can't teach you how to be strong, Rain. That is something that you

can only learn yourself. This world… it is a cruel and ruthless place. Some people are lucky enough to never learn its truth, but some do. And out of those, soft ones never survive.

You are very, very soft… but are you lucky? I don't know. It's up to you."

She listened to him attentively, an expression that was a bit too serious and somber for a girl her age appearing on her face. After a while, she said:

"I… I think I understand."

Sunny smiled.

"I hope that you do. But also, a part of me hopes that you don't."

He hesitated, then took out his communicator.

"Oh, and by the way… our lessons are going to have to stop for a while. My friends and I are going on a big expedition, you see, and I am not sure how long it is going to take. Don't worry, though — I have already taught you enough for you to continue practicing on your own. Do it diligently and don't get lazy! If you feel that you mastered everything before I return, call the number I just sent you.

It belongs to a friend of mine. Her name is Aiko, and she'll find you a new tutor."

Rain stared at her communicator for a long time, then looked at him and asked quietly:

"You are going on a big expedition?"

Sunny showed her a carefree smile and shrugged.

"Sure. Why?"

She hesitated for a few moments, and then asked, her voice suddenly uncharacteristically timid:

"Will it… will it be dangerous?"

He picked up his coffee, took a sip, and then shrugged again.

"Dangerous? Yeah, of course. Really dangerous, I guess. But… anything having to do with Spell is."

Rain looked at him with sudden intensity, her previous timidness gone. When she spoke, her voice rang with tension:

"Then why? Why are you going?"

Sunny looked at her in bewilderment, and then suddenly threw his head back and laughed.

When he was done laughing, he glanced at her and said with an amused smile:

"Why? The same reason you wanted to train. To become strong! Really strong..."

Chapter-559: No One Path

Some time later, Sunny was waiting in a cafe, looking out of the window at a lively street outside. People were rushing past, in a hurry to get inside before the heavy clouds covering the bleak sky erupted with rain. The subtle smell in the air told him that this was going to be a bad one — maybe not toxic enough to burn through clothes, but still unpleasantly hazardous.

The acid rain didn't bother Sunny too much, since it was something everyone was accustomed to. Even in the outskirts, people knew how to avoid getting caught in one. Here in a prosperous part of the city, citizens had many more protections.

What he was thinking about was the street itself.

This was the same cafe he used to visit when observing Rain, and the same street that had become a scene of panicked evacuation during the Gate incident several months ago. Armored vehicles of the government had torn apart the road, and several violent skirmishes had spilled into the peaceful surroundings.

And yet, there were no signs of the furious battle left. The road was long repaired, and the battle damage mended. The cafe was open again, and people went on about their business as though nothing had happened. They had endured the disaster and moved on, showing the astonishing resilience the human race possessed.

Not even the Nightmare Spell could overcome it.

At least it had not managed yet.

Sunny sighed and glanced at the pastry in front of him. At that moment, the door of the cafe opened, and the familiar sensation of phantom cold enveloped him.

Master Jet looked even more disheveled than usual, her uniform jacket actually sporting several small holes, their edges charred. However, she looked just as relaxed and strong as ever, her icy blue eyes radiating fierce energy. She seemed dead tired, but also, somehow, brimming with life.

Jet looked around, noticed Sunny, and offered him a smile. Then, she flicked a few flakes of soot off her epaulet, walked over, and crashed on the chair.

"I hope that this pastry is for me…"

He smiled, and pushed the plate and a cup of fresh coffee toward her.

"Of course."

Master Jet took a bite out of the pastry, closed her eyes in delight for a few moments, and then cradled the cup of coffee in her hands. After a while, she looked at him and sighed.

"So… Second Nightmare, huh?"

Sunny simply nodded.

Soul Reaper Jet was the only Ascended he knew well enough to trust… a little… so he had asked her to meet him, hoping to receive some advice. Nothing he could read on the network, or even in the staff library of the Academy, could be as valuable as talking to a person who had actually conquered a Seed once.

She took a sip of coffee and shook her head.

"Crazy kid…"

A slight smile appeared on his face.

"Kid? I am not that much younger than you. Well… I think?"

Jet glanced at him with a dangerous grin.

"Are you asking me about my age? Damn. I guess I haven't slapped you in a while..."

The two of them stared at each other for a few moments, and then laughed.

In truth, Sunny knew that Master Jet was in her late twenties, so the age gap between them was not insignificant. Considering how much had happened to him in the past two years, ten seemed like a lifetime. But at the same time, he wasn't a kid anymore… not by a long shot.

He looked down, thought for a few moments, and then said:

"Now is as good a time as any. I thought things through before deciding to challenge a Seed. This is for the best."

She studied him for some time, then nodded.

"I see. Well, there are a lot of benefits to being an Ascended. There are certain… drawbacks, too. But you don't need to worry about that for now. Right now, you need to concentrate on surviving the Nightmare."

Sunny smiled.

"My thought exactly. So… is there any wisdom a venerated elder like you can share with this ignorant junior?"

Master Jet glared at him, then took another bite of the pastry.

"Elder? Maybe I really should slap you…"

She lingered for a few moments, then sighed.

"The Second Nightmare… it is a lot like the First, but at the same time very different. The Spell will send you and your cohort into an illusion of the past, one centered around a central conflict. To conquer the Nightmare, you will have to resolve that conflict — one way or another. There is no right or wrong way to do so. You just have to end it somehow."

Jet fell silent, as if remembering her own trial. Her icy blue eyes stared into the distance.

"...That won't be easy, of course. Your friends might die. You might die, too. But you know this already… let's talk about the differences, then. The first one is rather obvious — the Nightmare will be larger, longer, and harder than your First one. The Nightmare Creatures populating it will be of higher Ranks and Classes, usually either Awakened or Fallen.

But if you're unlucky, you might meet a Corrupted one, too."

Sunny grimaced. His First Nightmare had pitted him against an Awakened Tyrant… what were the chances that he would get lucky this time and only encounter abominations within his ability to handle?

…Slim.

Master Jet, meanwhile, continued:

"The other difference is less talked about, but very important. Unlike the First Nightmare, this one won't be tailor-made for you personally. You're smart enough to think through the implications of that fact on your own, but I'll mention one thing that very few people consider.

The Spell will try to find you a body that closely resembles your own, but due to what I have just mentioned, it might not be as similar as what one might expect."

Sunny tilted his head and frowned.

"How different are we talking?"

She shrugged.

"You will be of the same Rank, that is certain. Your build will be more or less the same. But that's the thing… if you are unprepared, in a fight, "more or less" might cost you your life. A specialist has to rely on his or her body… it is our first and most important tool.

Imagine that you are suddenly slightly higher or shorter, your limbs are of a bit different length, your center of gravity has shifted a little. Many people died because they weren't quick enough or couldn't adapt to that sudden change."

Sunny closed his eyes for a moment.

For a fighter, their body was like a well-oiled machine that they knew in and out. They knew every detail about it, how it moved, how it performed in any given situation, what it could accomplish and what was beyond its ability. All battle techniques were finely tuned for that precise machine… changing its parameters was like throwing a wrench into the mechanism, potentially causing its collapse.

He had not known that detail. Luckily, now that he was informed, he would be able to prepare and shorten the adjustment period as much as possible.

"Thank you. That is a very valuable piece of information."

Master Jet shook her head.

"It's not like it's a secret. People just don't think about this stuff."

She hesitated, then said in a darker tone:

"The last large difference… hopefully, you won't have use for that knowledge. But if worse comes to worst, it is better to be prepared."

Sunny looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

She glanced at her cup, took a sip, and then carefully put it on the table.

"The thing is… I said that there is no one way to conquer the Nightmare. That means that some solutions can contradict each other. And people participating in the trial are not forced to aim for the same result."

He scowled.

"Uh... what exactly are you trying to say?"

Master Jet looked him in the eye and said, her voice cold and grim:

"I am saying that not all challengers have to be on the same side. That rarely happens… but you should keep that in mind, anyway."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then turned away.

He wondered what she wanted him to realize…

Was Master Jet warning him that his allies could betray him and turn into another obstacle he would have to overcome to escape the Nightmare?

Or saying that he… could betray them, if needed?

…They talked for a while, discussing various matters having to do with the Nightmare Seed and the trial itself. Sunny acquired a lot of useful information, as well as several pieces of valuable advice.

But throughout the whole discussion, he continued thinking about that one statement.

'Rarely happens… but you should keep that in mind, anyway…'

Chapter-560: Pawns of Fate

Sunny left the cafe and caught a train to go visit Aiko. After that, he traveled to the Academy and said his goodbyes to Teacher Julius. The old man was a bit emotional to let him go, but did not try to dissuade his unruly pupil. Instead, he tried to offer encouragement.

"The Second Nightmare! Ptui! No student of mine can be killed by a mere Second Nightmare. Don't you dare put a stain on my reputation, Sunny my boy… you hear me?"

Finally, Sunny left the Sleeper compound and stood outside for a while, watching the setting sun. Then, he turned around and headed deeper into the Academy complex.

The room where Nephis slept did not change much. He replaced the flowers on one of the tables and sat down, looking at her pale and motionless face.

No matter how many times Sunny came here, seeing her… seeing her like this… brought a dull pain to his chest. The cauldron of emotions burning in his heart was too deep and seethed too furiously for him to understand it. Sunny was never good with emotions, after all.

There was resentment, longing, guilt, affection, fear… and hope.

Looking at the transparent lid of the sleeping pod, he sighed.

"Hey, Neph."

Just like before, this was the only thing he said out loud. He lingered for a bit, and then thought:

'You are still alive, out there somewhere. That is good. That… makes me happy. It really does. You know, right after everything happened, I wasn't sure if I wanted you to live. I thought that maybe it would be

better for you to die.

Sometimes, I did.'

Sunny lowered his head and closed his eyes tiredly.

'But after a while, as time passed, I... I started to miss you more than I wanted to be free of you. Maybe what Master Jet said is true… maybe no one is really ever free in this world. Maybe the only freedom there is is the freedom to choose your own chains.'

A dark smile appeared on his lips.

'But that is the thing, isn't it? Even that choice was taken away from me. By you, by Cassie. By fate. I never had anything, and then, I had even less than that. Wouldn't you be angry to be dealt a hand like that?

Because I am. I am so, so angry. And that is why... I am never going to stop trying to break free. Screw truth, and screw fate. Who said that its chains can't be broken?'

Sunny shifted slightly, and stared at the sleeping young woman with burning intensity.

'I just have to get strong enough to rip them apart. You want to destroy the Spell? Well, I want to destroy fate itself. Which one of us do you think is more crazy?'

He suddenly laughed, his voice full of both mirth and bitterness.

'If Weaver did it, why can't I? And if Weaver created it, why can't you break it? If that is our will… who dares to stop us?'

Sunny smiled widely, and then grew quiet again, his eyes full of darkness.

After a while, he rubbed his face.

'Anyway… Cassie and I are going to challenge the Second Nightmare soon. We might not be able to visit you again for a long time. So you… you take care of yourself, Neph. Don't disappoint me. I am

counting on you to stay alive... to keep me striving to surpass you."

With that, he sighed heavily, stood up, and left without looking back.

It was finally time for him to sleep, too.

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...Before climbing into his luxurious sleeping pod, Sunny had a conversation with Effie. He moved her pod into the underground dojo and installed it near his own. The two of them were most likely going to spend a long time in the Nightmare, so the house had to be put on lockdown for the duration.

Hopefully, Sunny would be able to do it himself after coming back through the Gateway in Night Temple, but if things went wrong with the representatives of Valor, Effie was in charge of making the final preparations. He gave her the passwords from the security system and explained the procedure.

Then, Sunny ran the diagnostic on the pod, made sure that it was functioning perfectly and could sustain his body for months, if not years, and sighed.

…It didn't matter, really. After entering the Seed, he would either die or become a Master. If the former happened, the well-being of his physical body was a moot point. If the latter happened… paradoxically, the same statement applied.

Ascension merged the physical body with the spirit body… however, even if the physical body was completely destroyed, the process would create a new one. So, maybe, it was more appropriate to say that Ascension allowed the spirit body to become corporeal. In any case, the result was the same.

That was why Effie wanted to become a Master so badly, knowing that it would make her as strong and healthy as she was in the Dream Realm. Why many of the Lost dreamed of challenging the Second Nightmare, as well.

…And that was why it didn't matter even if the sleeping pod malfunctioned and thoroughly roasted Sunny's physical body instead

of preserving it. If the Nightmare didn't kill him, he would be as good as new.

Still, Sunny was very attached to his mortal shell. He didn't want any harm to come to it, if only out of sentimental reasons.

With a sigh, he undressed, took one last glance at his spacious dojo, and climbed into the pod.

Effie, who was watching him silently from her wheelchair, strained to raise a hand and waved him goodbye.

"Sweet dreams!"

Sunny wanted to snarl at her and remind the gluttonous huntress to not leave dirty dishes all over the house, but he was just too tired.

As soon as the lid of the metal sarcophagus started to move, his eyes closed, and he fell into the deep, dark embrace of sleep.

When Sunny opened his eyes again, he was already in the Sanctuary of Noctis.

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Sunny was standing on the edge of the island, looking at the heavenly chain that stretched far into the distance. His body was clad in a slender armor forged out of bleak steel, and in his hand was a somber black spear with a polished silver blade.

Cassie was standing by his side, wearing her midnight blue coat beneath a polished cuirass. Her hand rested on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, and an elegant half-mask rested on her face. A few strands of her long, golden hair were blowing in the wind.

They were ready to depart.

Sunny glanced at the two of them, then at the dull steel of the Undying Chain.

He wasn't foolish enough to fail to recognize that this was exactly how her vision of their death happened — with the two of them

alone, and him wearing metal armor.

The only thing missing was the snow.

…But Sunny didn't care.

He had been deceived by the knowledge of the future once, and all his desperate attempts to avoid it had only helped the vision happen. This time, he was not going to allow himself to be a pawn of fate. He was going to do what needed to be done, in a way he wanted to do it, and face the consequences without regret.

Sunny sighed, glanced at Cassie, and said:

"Let's go."

With that, he took a step forward and plunged off the edge of the island.

Chapter-561: Journey to the North

When they started their expedition, the last vestiges of summer warmth were leaving the Chained Isles. Not every region of the Dream Realm had seasons that were the same as those of the waking world, but this one was somewhat similar. By the time they were supposed to reach Night Temple, autumn would be in full swing.

If everything went well, the journey was going to take two or three weeks. Sunny wanted to reach the mysterious Citadel and retrieve the ivory knife by the middle of October, then rendezvous with Effie, Kai, and the Fire Keepers at the Shipwreck Island in the first days of November. That would give them almost a full month to reach the Ebony Tower and enter the Seed before winter.

Of course, in the Dream Realm, one could never put too much faith in any plan.

Sunny felt reasonably confident in his ability to travel across Chained Isles, but he knew not to get arrogant. This was a wild and deadly land, one full of fearsome creatures and insidious threats.

He had explored many islands and hunted down many abominations here, but even after nine months of fighting and traveling across the region, Sunny was only well-acquainted with the southeastern part of it, where the Sanctuary of Noctis was located. He had never ventured west or north of the Tear.

The situation was only made worse by the fact that the closer one got to the vast emptiness at the heart of the Chained Isles, the more dire dangers they would face. To reach Night Temple quickly, Sunny and Cassie had to reach the Tear and skirt around its edge, which meant that they would be moving through the most perilous area of the entire region.

Not all was bad, though. Cassie had some of the knowledge that Sunny lacked, since the Fire Keepers had spent a lot of time in the northern reaches of the Chained Isles. He also had all the information copied from Mordret's map, which contained a detailed description of many places they were going to have to travel through.

He was strong enough to face the dangers that awaited them there, and Cassie wasn't defenseless anymore. The two of them were enough... most likely. These were the reasons why Sunny had decided to attempt the expedition without a full cohort.

The following days proved that he had been right in his decision. Their journey was surprisingly smooth. The traversal itself provided no problems — Cassie was more than capable of moving from island to island without his help, which was a relief.

Due to her second Aspect Ability and the Quiet Dancer, the blind girl was able to move through space with an adequate measure of accuracy. As it turned out, she also had an Ascended charm that provided a powerful augmentation to a single Echo, which she used on her rapier.

With its help, the Dancer could carry her weight for a short distance, which allowed Cassie to get to and off the chains with ease. The only drawback of the charm was that it ate through her soul essence rapidly, and she couldn't use it often or for too long.

Of course, traversal was the least of their problems. As they traveled further into the heart of the Chained Isles, more and more Nightmare Creatures picked up their scent. That was where Sunny came in.

With the help of Saint and, when needed, the Soul Serpent, he was able to deal with anything that dared to attack them. Cassie helped, too, but there was rarely anything for her to do — Sunny and his Shadows were just too swift, cunning, and deadly. Their combined power was almost terrifying.

That was not to say that the blind girl was useless. On the contrary, her presence was perhaps the single most important factor of why they were able to move toward their goal with such ease.

Her great affinity to revelations, keen senses, and supernatural intuition complimented Sunny's battle prowess perfectly. It was almost disturbing how well they worked together — him scouting ahead and obliterating monsters, her guiding them through the maze of shifting isles in a way that took them past the true horrors, the hidden hazards, and the Crushing.

The strangest part about all of this was that they didn't even talk to each other that much, yet were able to achieve such a deep level of understanding. Most of the journey was spent in silence, with both of them preferring not to speak to another unless absolutely necessary. There was no small talk, no irrelevant conversations, and no friendly banter.

Sunny didn't even talk to his shadows and Saint like he was already used to, which made the silence almost suffocating. It was indeed a bit awkward in the beginning… but then, he got used to it. He actually started to enjoy the peace and quiet, as well as the company of another human being — even if it was Cassie.

Their cooperation was efficient, seamless, and not burdened with emotions and other troublesome complications. An alliance of pure convenience. What was there to complain about?

They traveled across islands that were barren and stark, and across islands that were lush with beautiful verdure. Across islands that teemed with vile abominations, and islands that were full of nothing but bones and ash. Across islands that were open and vast, and islands that were small and hid unseen dangers behind a veil of deception.

…It wasn't long before a day arrived when a dark line became visible far away, over the northern horizon. When Sunny first saw it, he stood motionlessly for a while, looking north with a dark expression.

The Hollow Mountains.

After so long, he finally saw them again.

Every day after that, the black line grew bigger and closer. Soon, he was already able to discern individual peaks and the jagged shape of

the mountain chain that pierced the sky, like the fangs of a colossal dragon.

And on the day that the dark peaks towered above, shrouded in flowing mist… they finally reached Night Temple.

Chapter-562: Into the Night

The chain swayed lightly as Sunny and Cassie walked across it, rattling loudly from time to time. Since the island that they had just left was currently ascending, the one in front of them was below and fully visible.

The Northern Island was not too large, maybe two kilometers in diameter. Its surface was one vast level plain, and covered entirely by a beautiful field of violet flowers, as if wrapped in a silken mantle. Despite the fact that the sun was high in the sky, the buds of the delicate flowers closed.

From what Cassie had told him, Sunny knew that they would open only at night, emanating an eerie and beautiful light. He would have liked to witness that strange and magical sight himself, but right now, there were far more important things for them to do.

Not to mention that, at the moment, Sunny's attention wasn't even on the island itself.

Instead, he was looking past it, at the draconian peaks of the Hollow Mountains that towered above the island, submerging it into their vast and deep shadow.

They were shrouded in white mist that flowed slowly down the dark slopes and fell into the black abyss of the Sky Below like an endless wall of white, swirling clouds. The image of it was both magnificent and frightening.

It was as though the sky itself was slowly being devoured by the lightless void… or maybe invading it.

Looking at the dreadful mountains, Sunny couldn't help but wonder if Nephis was currently lost somewhere out there, in the white mist. Or had she not dared to enter it and instead chose one of the other

directions?

There was no way to know.

With a sigh, he looked down and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Soon, they reached the Northern island and flew up — Sunny with the help of the Prowling Thorn and the Dark Wing, Cassie by unsheathing the Quiet Dancer, jumping, and holding tightly to the hilt as the flying rapier pulled her into the air.

The two of them landed softly amidst the delicate flowers and looked around. Without the need to say anything, Sunny allowed the blind girl to take the lead and followed her as they walked toward the only landmark on the island — the ruins of the ancient fortress that perched precariously on its northern edge. It was very similar to the crumbled stronghold where he had met Effie and Kai.

Trying not to disturb the flowers, they crossed the island and entered the fortress. Nothing attacked them on the way, and there were no sounds except for the whistling of the wind and that of their footsteps. The Northern island was beautiful, silent, and strangely peaceful.

Looking through the broken gateway of the ancient stronghold, Sunny studied the colossal chain that anchored the Isles to the Hollow Mountains. The swirling mist flowed down on both sides of it, obscuring the point where the chain sunk into the dark stone.

He remained motionless for a few moments, then shivered and looked away.

At the very corner of the platform that lay beyond the gate, almost unnoticeable, a narrow set of stairs led down, cut from weathered rock. The path snaked around the overhanging slope, clinging to the stone surface as it led to the dark side of the island.

Cassie put one hand on the stones and, tracing her fingers across them, cautiously stepped onto the stairs. Sunny followed, looking down with a dark expression.

The path leading to the Night Temple was long and narrow. There was barely enough space for two people to walk side by side. To his right was the stone wall of the island, and to his left was the bottomless dark abyss of the Sky Below. One careless step could spell a person's doom.

The placement of the stairs was not accidental, as well. If an attacking force tried to lead an assault down the path, they would have had to fight the defenders one at a time, with the movements of the fighter's right hand being restricted by the slope. Ranged attacks wouldn't help much due to the curvature of the wall, too.

In a place like that, one warrior could stop an entire army.

They descended lower and lower, finally reaching the dark side after a long time.

At the point where the slope turned almost completely horizontal, the stairs transformed into a strange hanging bridge that was attached to the stone surface above by rusty chains. It swayed precariously above the dark chasm of the Sky Below, leading all the way to the center of the isle… to the Night Temple.

Sunny froze, startled by a mournful sound of a loud bell that suddenly rolled through the darkness.

In front of him, at some distance, a magnificent structure protruded from the underbelly of the floating island. Made out of black stone, it resembled a tall, somber cathedral that was somehow built upside down and hovered above the abyss of impenetrable darkness.

The foundation was its highest point, and its seven belfries descended into the depths of the black void, each ending with a short chain that held a massive bell cast of tarnished green copper.

Since Night Temple was located under the island, the light of the sun never reached it. Instead, the cathedral was shrouded in eternal shadow, with only the pale shining of the distant divine flames caressing its black walls.

In a strange reversal, the velvet darkness of the abyss and the

scattering of false stars in its depths seemed like a vast night sky hanging above it.

As Sunny watched, a second bell rang. He shifted a little and turned his attention to the narrow path, tracing its treacherous steps all the way to the massive iron gates of the cathedral.

Cassie turned to him, lingered for a moment, and said:

"Let's go. They've seen us."

Sunny nodded and took a step forward.

Night Temple waited ahead, its gates opened like a hungry mouth.

Chapter-563: Lost Sentinels

As they walked toward the gates, Sunny asked quietly:

"So… what happens now, exactly?"

Cassie thought for a few moments before answering.

"I am not sure. That depends on whether Saint Cormac is inside the Citadel or out exploring the Hollow Mountains. In any case, my standing should be good enough to at least get an audience with one of the Masters overseeing the Temple in his absence."

She hesitated, then added:

"If we are allowed inside, there are several rules you must follow. Outsiders aren't allowed to summon any Memories or Echoes inside the Citadel. We can only go into the allowed areas, unless a Master is escorting us. We may not speak with the inhabitants of the temple unless they address us first… additionally, all items we bring inside have to be inspected."

Sunny frowned. The rules were not only strange, but also strict and would put him at a disadvantage should anything happen. However, he remembered Sky Tide's warning… she told him not to break any rules inside Night Temple.

'Alright… I won't do anything risky unless absolutely necessary. Let's see how this plays out first.'

As they approached the ornate gates, two figures became visible standing on both sides of it. One was a man, and the other was a woman. Both sentinels were in their thirties and had calm, cold, dangerous eyes.

'So… these are the Lost.'

It was Sunny's first time meeting their kind. In truth, there was not much difference between them and those Awakened who had not lost their physical bodies.

…That was not to say that the sentinels were ordinary.

Both radiated an imposing, overbearing aura. Just from how the Lost held themselves, Sunny could tell that they were extremely experienced and fearsome warriors. Their armors were perfectly crafted, and their weapons had a dangerous luster, all clearly of a high Rank.

The pressure these sentinels exerted reminded him of the oldest and most deadly hunters of the Dark City, those who had survived long years of bloody battles in the hell of the Forgotten Shore. If he was honest, he had to admit that most Awakened anchored at the Sanctuary of Noctis seemed like children when compared to the two Lost.

These people were no joke. And there were a hundred more inside the cathedral, if what Cassie had told him was true. If all of them were the same as the sentinels…

Sunny suppressed a shiver.

He might have vastly underestimated the scale of the force that clan Valor had stationed at the precipice of the Hollow Mountains. The somber cathedral hid an entire army.

But… why only keep the Lost here? What purpose could it serve? The mystery had been tormenting him ever since he learned of it.

…At some point, one of the sentinels raised a hand, commanding them to stop. He studied both Sunny and Cassie for a while, and then said in a cold voice:

"Lady Song of the Fallen… what a nice surprise to see you again. I hope that the other members of your cohort are well."

His tone did not match the friendly words at all.

The blind girl simply nodded.

"They are well and in good health, anchored at the Sanctuary of Noctis."

The second sentinel raised an eyebrow and spoke:

"Oh? What prompted you to make the long journey and return to our modest Citadel, then? In a company of a stranger and without your loyal comrades, no less..."

Cassie glanced at Sunny and smiled.

"This is Awakened Sunless, and he is not a stranger. In fact, he is a dear friend of mine and one of the few people in this world I would trust with my life. Both of us used to be Lady Changing Star's companions."

Sunny almost choked.

'Such smooth lies… admirable!'

The blind girl, meanwhile, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"...We hoped to have an audience with Lord Cormac."

The sentinels remained silent for a while, making Sunny feel a bit nervous. Finally, one of them answered:

"Lord Cormac is carrying out one of his missions. He won't be back for several weeks, at least."

Cassie's smile didn't waver. Without skipping a bit, she said, her voice as polite and pleasant as before:

"Sir Pierce or Lady Welthe, then."

The sentinels looked at each other. After a while, one of them sighed.

"Wait here."

With that, he disappeared, leaving Sunny and Cassie under the heavy gaze of the remaining Lost.

Sunny stared back, shamelessly studying the sentinel. No matter how

he tried, he couldn't tell the difference. She looked just like a normal Awakened would in the Dream Realm… well, it made sense. Her spirit body was the same, after all.

…It was also shaped very nicely.

"What are you staring at, boy?"

Sunny looked up and smiled. For a moment, he was very tempted to answer honestly… but then his common sense won over.

"...Your armor, ma'am. It seems like a fine Memory."

The sentinel snarled and didn't say anything.

After some time, the second one returned and beckoned them to follow.

They were led into a small, chilly room at the side of the gate and handed two sets of simple garments made out of crude cloth, then locked inside. Sunny stared at the bundle in his hands with a perplexed expression.

"Uh… what is that for?"

Cassie sighed and unbuckled her belt, then dismissed the Quiet Dancer and placed its empty scabbard on a bench.

"No Memories or Echoes allowed, remember?"

Sunny frowned, then glanced at his armor. If he dismissed it, he would be more or less naked…

"They are expecting us to change here?"

The blind girl silently turned her back to him. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then did the same. His shadow looked away, too.

Cursing inwardly, he dismissed the Undying Chain, and felt the shadows in the tiny room shift as Cassie's cuirass and coat crumbled into a rain of sparks. They were close enough for him to hear the steady beating of her heart, and sense the heat emanating from her

body.

Trying not to let his imagination wander, Sunny put on a pair of simple trousers, and heard the fabric rustle as it slid across her smooth skin.

'Bastards… they couldn't give us two rooms to change?'

Suppressing his anger, Sunny put on a tunic and frowned. Its sleeves were too short to hide the coils of the Soul Serpent. More than that, they revealed the two shadows that were wrapped around his body, shrouding it in a thin layer of darkness.

…Not to mention that both the tunic and the trousers were several sizes too big for him.

With a sigh, Sunny commanded the shadows to crawl up his arms, hiding them from sight.

Then, he dismissed the Serpent and bent down to roll up the pant legs and put on a pair of leather sandals, and cleared his throat.

"Are you done?"

Cassie answered after a short pause:

"Yes."

The clothes provided to her consisted of similar sandals and a long tunic that left her shoulders bare and her legs exposed below the knee. The silver half-mask was gone, too, revealing Cassie's beautiful blue eyes. Sunny stared at her for a few moments, realizing that he had almost forgotten how they looked.

Then, he scowled and banged on the door.

Soon, the same sentinel let them out and led them through into the depths of the Night Temple.

As soon as they left the gateway behind, Sunny tensed, as if expecting something terrible to happen.

…But nothing did.

The sentinel glanced at him and frowned.

"What are you waiting for? Come. Sir Pierce will see be with us shortly."

Chapter-564: Inspection

The interior of the somber cathedral was as bizarre as its exterior. Sunny expected the actual floors to be constructed properly, and some of the corridors they walked through were. But other parts of Night Temple were upside-down, as well, the flat floors serving as ceilings and the arching ceiling serving as uneven floors.

And that was just the outward ring. He didn't even want to imagine how the temple itself and the inner sanctum looked.

As they walked, he saw several Lost silently going about the mundane business of maintaining the Citadel. They were dressed in the same crude clothes he was now wearing, and wielded no weapons.

However, every one of them, from a person calmly changing the oil in the wall lamps to a man sweeping the floors, radiated the same aura of strength and lethality as the two sentinels that had met them at the gate.

They were all battle-hardened, veteran elites.

'...Just what is this place?'

After descending a few sets of twisting stairs, Sunny and Cassie were led to another, slightly bigger room. That one had a large table in its center.

The sentinel gestured at it and said, his voice not betraying any emotions:

"Sir Pierce is on his way. Please, present the items you brought from the outside for inspection."

Cassie took a step forward and placed her belt and scabbard on the

table. The Lost shifted his gaze to Sunny and waited.

"Uh… all my things are stored inside a Memory."

He considered hiding the existence of the Covetous Coffer, but thought better of it. There was nothing inside of it worth hiding, anyway... or rather, almost nothing.

The sentinel frowned, then said in a dark tone:

"Summon it."

Soon, the small box was sitting on the table. Sunny opened it and started producing item after item, slowly building a large pile. They were spices, cooking utensils, hygienic products, several packs of underwear… both male and female, which earned him a strange look… a piece of a broken mirror, a couple of soul shards, a folding chair, various snacks, packs of tea and coffee, and many more.

As the pile slowly became larger and larger, the sentinel's face grew more and more incredulous. Finally, his eye twitched.

"How much trash do you have in that box?"

Sunny smiled.

"Almost finished!"

He fished out a tube of sunscreen and several sticks of lip balm, threw them into the pile, then thrust his arm into the maw of the Covetous Coffer up to the shoulder. Ignoring the obsidian knife, Weaver's needle, and skeins of diamond string, he swept its bottom a few times, and then finally took a step back.

"That is all the trash I have."

The Lost shook his head and started picking up the items one after another, inspecting them carefully. What he was expecting to discover, Sunny did not know.

At that moment, the door of the room opened, and a tall man with sharp features and steely eyes came in. His dark hair was cut short,

and there was stubble on his cheeks. The man wore a scale armor forged out of lusterless blue steel, and held himself with the relaxed confidence of an experienced killer.

Sunny didn't need an introduction to realize that he was standing in front of a Master… and a powerful one, at that.

Sir Pierce seemed to be less frightening than Morgan of Valor, but Morgan was barely older than Effie while this man had a decade or two to sharpen his skill and accumulate battle experience. He was a knight of Valor, still. Sunny harbored no illusions — in front of this monster, neither Cassie nor he stood a chance.

Especially not while surrounded by an army of a hundred Awakened elites.

'Why am I thinking about this? We are here to talk, not fight…'

And they really needed this conversation to go well. Depending on how convincing they could be and how receptive Sir Pierce was, Sunny would either have to do things the easy way, the hard way… or abandon his plans to retrieve the second knife altogether.

The sentinel greeted the Master respectfully, and then continued to inspect the mountain of items Sunny had produced from the Covetous Coffer. Sir Pierce glanced at it for a moment, then turned to Cassie.

"Awakened Cassia. Welcome back to the Night Temple."

Cassie bowed slightly.

"Sir Pierce."

Sunny suppressed the desire to roll his eyes.

'It's like I am invisible.'

Both the sentinels and the formidable Master had ignored his existence entirely, preferring to address the blind girl. Part of the reason must have been that they already knew her, but mostly it had to do with her status as a bearer of a True Name.

Well, it suited Sunny perfectly. He liked to remain as unnoticeable as possible.

Sir Pierce and Cassie exchanged several pleasantries, slowly approaching the discussion of the real issue. Sunny listened attentively, knowing how much rode on this conversation.

…At some point, however, he got distracted.

'What… what was that?'

For a moment, he thought that he heard someone sigh deeply behind him. No… he definitely did!

But there was no one there.

Sunny frowned.

'Am I hallucinating, or…'

It was then that a familiar voice suddenly resounded in his ears:

"Sunless… I am so glad that you made it."

Sunny's eyes widened slightly. He looked at the sentinel, Cassie, and Master Pierce. None of them showed any sign that they had heard anything. Turning away, as if to stare at the wall, he hid his face and said in a barely audible whisper:

"Mordret! Where have you been, bastard?"

His words sounded harsh, but his tone was actually elated.

The voice chuckled, making Sunny feel a bit tense, for some reason.

Was it just him… or did the mysterious prince sound a bit different?

"Me? Oh… actually, I was with you this whole time, watching as you traveled across the Dream Realm. I just chose not to speak."

Sunny blinked a couple of times. A heavy, cold feeling settled in his chest.

Something was wrong. Very, very wrong…

"You… chose not to speak? Why?"

Mordret remained silent for a few moments, then said in his usual pleasant tone:

"With how cautious you are, I was afraid that you wouldn't come if I said too much."

'What… what does he mean?'

Sunny felt his heart beating wildly in his chest. His intuition was sounding the alarms, filling him a sudden feeling of dread.

'Fooled… was I fooled?

"Come where? Here, to the Night Temple?"

At that moment, the sentinel picked up the piece of the broken mirror from the pile.

Mordret spoke again, his voice still friendly, but suddenly much colder and deeper beneath the surface. Like a dark and restless ocean hiding under a thin veil of mist…

"Indeed. Thank you for bringing this piece of mirror to me, Sunless. I am very grateful."

Sir Pierce casually glanced at the sentinel while responding to Cassie. His gaze stopped at the mirror. In the next moment, his pupils widened.

"...And very sorry for what is about to happen next."

The formidable Master was suddenly near the table, the Lost thrown aside. The piece of the mirror was in his hand.

Throwing a wild look at Sunny, he screamed:

"Where did you find it, boy?! Answer me!"

Sunny took a step back, stunned.

"I… I…"

He remembered Saint Tyris telling him not to mention Reckoning island. However, at the moment, it seemed like Pierce would rip him apart if Sunny dared to twist the truth even a little. So, he answered honestly:

"Reckoning. I picked it up after slaying a strange creature."

Sir Pierce stared at him for a moment, and then his face suddenly changed. It became deathly pale and motionless, as if aged by ten years. His eyes grew wide and glassy.

The fearsome Master was… was…

Terrified.

But before any of them could do anything, a thin crack appeared on the shard in his hand.

And in the next moment, all Sunny could hear was the sound of breaking mirrors.

Chapter-565: Unleashed

Sunny flinched as the sound of shattering mirrors filled his ears. No one else seemed to react to it, though — and a moment later, as the cracked piece of glass in Master Pierce's hand exploded into a rain of shards, the sound abruptly disappeared.

The fearsome man shuddered.

"No…"

'What is happening?!'

Sunny took a step back. Things were happening too fast, and he couldn't comprehend the situation yet. All he knew was that his heart was cold, and his mind was overwhelmed by a premonition of something ominous, dreadful, and disastrous happening.

He had been fooled… he had made a mistake!

Cassie shifted slightly, tilting her head with a tense and confused expression.

In the next moment, Pierce swiftly turned to the sentinel, his face still pale and terrified, but now also full of grim resolve. His voice, which had been so confident just a few moments ago, now sounded panicked:

"Seal the temple! Destroy the Gateway! Go, now! We can't… we can't let that thing escape…"

Sunny's eyes widened.

'D… destroy the Gateway?! What the hell does he mean?!'

And what thing was he talking about?

The sentinel didn't seem to have these questions. Pierce's terror had spread to him like an infection, but the man simply nodded and darted out of the room without letting fear slow him down.

Cassie took a step back to let him pass, then asked tensely:

"Sir Pierce? What is going on?"

As though reminded of their presence, the Master turned around and threw a dark, menacing look at Sunny.

"...You!"

His voice shook with barely suppressed fury.

'Crap…'

Sunny thought about summoning the Cruel Sight, but before he could even move, the tall man was already beside him, grabbing him by the shoulder. If it wasn't for the Bone Weave, Sunny's clavicle might have cracked from the terrible pressure.

With his other hand, Pierce grabbed Cassie, causing her to yelp in pain.

"I'll deal with the two of you later… there's no time…"

Next thing Sunny knew, they were being dragged out of the room. He threw a regretful glance at the pile of his belongings that was left laying on the table, stared at the Covetous Coffer for a moment, and then turned away.

'What to do, what to do…'

The situation was clearly out of his control now. Mordret had done something… had manipulated him to do something… and now, the whole Citadel was on high alert and furious with Sunny. Whatever it was that the mysterious prince had used Sunny to achieve, it was bad enough to terrify a Master and justify the irrevocable destruction of a precious Gateway.

So, there were two questions.

'Should I try to fight my way out? And… should I also be terrified of the thing that Mordret unleashed?'

Suddenly, another thought occurred to Sunny.

'Or is… is Mordret himself that thing?'

His heart grew even colder.

There was not enough information to answer the second question, but the first one was rather easy. Sunny was strong, but not nearly strong enough to fight two Masters and a hundred deadly elites, especially not on their home ground. Plus, both he and Cassie had status… even a great clan wouldn't dare to make them disappear without proper cause.

'I... I need more information first. Let's see how this plays out and make a move if the circumstances demand it…'

So, he didn't struggle as Master Pierce dragged them into the corridor.

Outside the small room, the Citadel that had been peaceful and somber before was now in a state of pandemonium. Several Lost darted past them, their shadows dancing on the black walls in the orange glow of the ornate oil lamps.

Sunny could see motion and sense hurried, but orderly movement in every direction. Unlike before, each inhabitant of the temple was now clad in armor and wielded deadly weapons. They were swift and disciplined, like professional soldiers that were preparing for war.

And there was an army of them.

But, despite all that…

Was it nervousness he felt behind the facade of calmness the Lost showed?

Master Pierce shouted at one of the sentinels, ordering him to stop, then pushed Sunny and Cassie toward the man.

"Lock these two up in the lesser cell!"

Sunny wanted to express his outrage, but before he could, the whole temple suddenly shuddered. A few moments later, a deafening soundwave rolled through the corridor.

'The gates… they have closed them…'

But it wasn't as simple as that. Since they were still in the outward ring of the Citadel, his shadow sense had been somewhat able to reach into the emptiness beyond its outer wall. But as soon as the gates closed, that changed, as though the temple was now completely cut off from the outside world.

It was now sealed… with them inside…

The sentinel silently grabbed the two of them and dragged them away. Staggering and trying not to fall, Sunny threw a glance behind his shoulder.

The last thing he saw was a woman with beautiful red hair appearing before the fearsome Master. She wore a simple black tunic and leather vambraces, her shins protected by a pair of greaves. The woman's face was grim and full of tension.

"...Pierce! What the Spell happened?!"

A moment later, the two disappeared behind a turn of the corridor.

'This must be Master Welthe…'

The Lost swiftly dragged them through the disorienting maze of corridors and stairs. They were descending lower and lower, most likely heading toward one of the cathedral's belfries. His expression was dark and severe, and for a good reason — everywhere they passed through, the inhabitants of the Night Temple were busy preparing for battle.

It was as though they were expecting to face a terrifying siege…

The threat, however, didn't seem to be coming from the outside. Instead, most of the Lost were rushing deeper into the temple, toward

its inner sanctum.

…It wasn't long before they heard screams.

The sound traveled through the confusing interior of the cathedral in a strange manner, so it was hard to say from which direction the screams came. They seemed distant, and yet, Sunny couldn't help but feel his blood run cold.

These chilling wails were full of indescribable agony and terror… he knew the type too well. These were the screams that humans let out when they were not only horribly hurt, but also maimed, knowing that their lives were either over or would never be the same.

The sentinel in charge of them stopped for a moment. His face grew ashen, and without saying a word, he continued to drag them toward a heavy metal door at the end of a long corridor.

The Lost used an elaborate key to open the door, and then pushed them inside.

Sunny and Cassie found themselves in a circular chamber that had a tall ceiling… or rather, a tall floor, since it was built in reverse. The domed ceiling of the chamber was actually beneath their feet, sloping down like a deep crater.

In the center of the cell, a large iron cage stood, each bar of it as thick as a man's arm. Strange runes were inscribed all around the cage, circling it entirely.

'What the…'

A moment later, the sentinel unceremoniously pushed them both in the backs, causing Sunny and Cassie to roll down the slope of the dome and through the door of the cage, which he then promptly closed.

It locked with a loud click, cutting their way to freedom.

'No way...'

Sunny rose to his feet, turned around, and watched as the Lost left

the room and shut the door behind him.

For a few moments, they were left in absolute silence. The room was dark, with only a single oil lamp burning on the wall near the exit. Its orange flame trembled and danced, barely managing to keep the shadows at bay.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then kicked the iron bars with all his might and screamed in anger and frustration:

"Damn it! Damn it all"

Behind him, Cassie slowly stood up, then swayed a little.

"Sunny…"

He turned to her and snarled:

"What?!"

The blind girl grimaced.

"Something… something is wrong. I feel…"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then blinked and looked outside the cage.

...The runes surrounding it were slowly starting to emanate an eerie, dangerous blue glow.

Chapter-566: Imprisoned

Sunny looked at the runes. Their eerie glow was swiftly growing brighter and brighter, drowning the chamber in a ghostly light. Slowly, a deep frown appeared on his face.

Then, suddenly, his eyes widened.

"Crap!"

But it was already too late. The runes shimmered, and in the next moment, he felt his reserve of shadow essence plunging. It was as though something was draining the essence out of his soul with terrifying speed.

At the same time, the range of shadow essence diminished even further, becoming limited by the size of the cage. The gloomy shadow recoiled, trying to get away from the shining runes.

Sunny hurriedly tried to summon the Cruel Sight, but he was a second too slow. Before the spear could form itself from the sparks of light, his essence ran dry, and it disintegrated before assuming a physical form.

"...Damnation!"

He looked helplessly at the bars of the cage and clenched his fists.

This was indeed a jail cell built to contain Awakened. Without shadow essence, he wouldn't be able to use Shadow Step to escape. More than that, he couldn't summon Memories anymore — manifesting them into reality demanded essence, as well, even if it was a tiny amount.

The same went for Echoes… and even Shadows.

He also felt weak, and was only going to grow weaker in the coming hours — without essence circulating through his body, Sunny's strength was vastly diminished.

...Whoever created this damned cage really knew what they were doing.

With a resentful snarl, Sunny turned around and allowed himself to slide down to the center of the dome, where Cassie stood with a lost expression on her pale, delicate face.

Raising one hand awkwardly, she tentatively moved it through the air around her and whispered:

"...I am blind again."

Sunny frowned, stared at her for a moment, and then turned away.

"You were always blind."

Of course, he knew what Cassie meant — without soul essence, the Aspect Ability that allowed her to perceive the world from several seconds in the future was gone, too. It wasn't exactly sight, but something that had replaced being able to see to her.

His words might have been cruel, but Sunny was not in the mood for pleasantries.

Being locked in a cage, powerless to escape… that was his worst nightmare.

And he had no one but himself to blame for ending up that way!

Turning away from the blind girl, Sunny sat down, lowered his head, and grabbed it with both hands.

'Curse him…'

Suddenly, the cathedral shook again.

Cassie remained silent for a while, then said quietly:

"That must have been the Gateway. They… they really destroyed it."

Sunny closed his eyes.

"I guess you are right."

He heard her sitting down opposite him and wondered about the black altar that was now laying somewhere in the depths of the Citadel in pieces. Was the ivory knife destroyed, as well?

Had there even been a second knife, to begin with? Or was it just a lie Mordret had invented to lure him into the Night Temple?

What else had he lied about?

Sunny gritted his teeth, suppressing a groan. He felt scared, furious, and utterly humiliated.

He had been so careful not to trust the mysterious voice after hearing it for the first time. But Mordret had been so helpful, and had provided him with so much valuable information that proved to be true. Sunny was, most likely, only alive because of the lost prince's aid.

Even so, he had never lowered his guard. If there had been the smallest hint that Mordret wanted something from him, he would have suspected the worst. But the bastard was just too devious and cunning… terrifyingly so.

Mordret had played him like a fiddle...

He had understood perfectly just how untrusting Sunny was, and went with the lightest of approaches. Knowing that any pressure would scare his paranoid mark off, Mordret had simply mentioned the ivory knife in passing and never spoke about it again… in fact, after the hook was in, he had never spoken to Sunny again.

Observing silently and waiting for his prey to come to him of its own volition…

Sunny shuddered.

'Oh, gods… how much has he seen?'

He was willing to bet that there had never even been a need for Mordret to wait days between their conversations. All of it was just a part of an intricate web of lies and manipulation.

'Fool! I am such a fool!'

How had he allowed himself to be fooled so completely?

A crazy smile suddenly appeared on Sunny's face, and he let out a stifled laugh.

Wasn't the answer obvious? Truth… his downfall was the truth! Like a masterful liar, Mordret had mixed just enough of it into his lies to make them believable.

"Oh, the irony..."

Cassie shifted slightly, and asked, her voice soft and cautious:

"Sunny? What exactly happened back there?"

He let out a bitter chuckle and answered in a dark tone:

"Why? Don't you know everything?"

The blind girl didn't answer, and after some more time passed, he sighed.

"...Sorry. It was me. I got us into this mess."

Sunny straightened and forced himself to calm down.

Dwelling on the past was not going to do them any good. The situation was bad, but not hopeless. The future was uncertain, and there would surely be a chance to turn everything around… he just needed to remain in control of himself and be ready to act when an opportunity presented itself.

Who said that Mordret was going to have the last laugh?

"Do you remember the mysterious Lost I told you about? The one

who had taught me about the Seed, and the knives?"

Cassie nodded slowly.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then shook his head.

"Well, as it turns out, he lured me into the Night Temple on purpose. He needed the piece of mirror I found a while back, for some reason. When Master Pierce saw it, all hell broke loose."

She remained silent for some time, and then asked:

"Do you think that this Lost is here, in the Night Temple?"

Sunny looked away. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded grim:

"I do. Actually… I think that this whole Citadel is a prison. A prison that was meant to contain a single creature. Him."

Cassie shivered and hugged her shoulders. A heavy silence settled between them.

After a while, she said:

"Maybe you are right. But, Sunny…"

Her voice trembled:

"...What kind of a being would require a hundred Awakened fighters, two Ascended knights, and a Saint to guard it?"

Sunny stared at her, not knowing what to say.

He had no idea.

Chapter-567: No Escape

Sunny felt that there was a hint about what manner of a creature Mordret was in the fact that only the Lost and human Echoes had been allowed to guard him, but that was too little information to make a guess.

What else did he know about the man who called himself the Prince of Nothing?

He was reasonably sure that Mordret was a human… or at least had been once, at some point. A Nightmare Creature could fake a human voice, but not the knowledge of the waking world that Mordret had shown. Sunny also felt that the mysterious prince had told the truth about conquering the First Nightmare at twelve years of age.

Other than that, all Sunny had was the description of the Cruel Sight, which told of a prince that had been given away to a monstrous Dreamspawn, and later returned only to find out that he wasn't welcome in his father's home anymore. That and the fact that the Mirror Beast had been created by Mordret, much like Saint had been created by him.

That was not much to go off of…

With a sigh, Sunny looked around the cage.

Due to the concave nature of its floor, he and Cassie were forced to stay close to each other. The only surface flat enough to sit comfortably was at the very center of the dome, and not too large in diameter. The cage was utterly empty, with the exception of a rusty bucket that was covered by a wooden lid.

Sunny stared at a bucket for a while, then grimaced.

"How long do you think they'll keep us here?"

Cassie remained silent for a while, then answered evenly:

"That depends on whether they can contain the prisoner."

A deep scowl appeared on his face.

Would a hundred elite Awakened warriors and two Masters, all in service to a Great Clan, be able to handle Mordret? Before today, he would have said yes without a moment of hesitation. No matter how powerful the mysterious prince was, how could he contend against an entire army?

…But after seeing the terror on Sir Pierce's face and how nervous the Lost were, Sunny wasn't so sure anymore.

And what would happen if Mordret somehow prevailed?

Would they be safe?

Or… would they learn that terror themselves?

'Crap…'

Sunny threw a dark glance at the door of the chamber and closed his eyes.

For now, there was nothing they could do but wait.

Minutes passed, slowly converging into hours. With no windows, it was hard to measure the passage of time. Sunny and Cassie mostly remained silent, partially because each was preoccupied with their own thoughts, and partially because there was nothing useful they could say.

The Night Temple shuddered several more times, but these tremors weren't as strong as the first two. Sunny silently meditated, feeling the shadow essence dissipate from his muscles and his strength slowly diminishing. After a while, he stood up, climbed to the walls of the cage, and studied the runes, then explored every centimeter of the cell.

He even tried to bend and dislodge the iron bars, but it was useless.

The cage seemed to be built to imprison Masters or, perhaps, even Saints. Even at his full power, Sunny wouldn't have been able to break free with brute force.

After a while, he had no choice but to slide back to the center of the dome and resume doing nothing.

…He hadn't had an opportunity like that in a long while. Actually, doing nothing was sort of relaxing — if he ignored the fact that their lives were hanging by a thread, of course.

The blue glow of the runes and the orange light of the oil lamp were soft and dim, leaving the chamber dark and full of shadows. Somewhere outside, a gruesome massacre was perhaps taking place.

But here, everything was calm and silent.

Sunny was on the verge of dozing off when Cassie suddenly turned to face the door.

"Someone is coming."

He opened his eyes and stood up, then glanced at the oil lamp with a dark expression. Its dancing flame trembled, and then disappeared for a moment when the door opened with a bang and a gust of wind entered the cell.

Five people came inside.

Four of them were Lost warriors, their faces grim and their armor bloodied. One was the same sentinel who had locked them inside, his face ashen and pale, a piece of white cloth wrapped around his head like a makeshift bandage.

The fifth was a woman with beautiful red hair, wearing a black tunic… Master Welthe. There was a strange amulet in the shape of an anvil hanging on a thin chain around her neck, and murder in her eyes. The aura she emanated was truly frightening.

'So, Mordret did not manage to escape, after all…'

The Master threw a cold glance at Cassie, then turned to Sunny.

"You! You brought that piece of mirror into the Citadel, correct?"

Sunny shifted slightly.

"I did."

The corner of Welthe's mouth twitched.

"Who instructed you to do so?!"

He blinked a couple of times.

"What? No one instructed me. I had no idea what that shard was. I just thought that it was curious and picked it up…"

The beautiful woman glanced at one of the Lost, who nodded.

"He is telling the truth. Or at least believes in what he says."

Sunny studied the Lost, who was a man in his thirties, with a gaunt face and clear, grey eyes.

'Great. Another walking lie detector…'

Welthe frowned, then pierced Sunny with a heavy gaze.

"What was your purpose in coming to Night Temple?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments. When he spoke, his voice sounded frightened and a little shaky:

"I've been told that there is... there is a special knife here, on the altar. I am interested in that knife, because it has to do with the past of the Chained Isles. I am a researcher at the Awakened Academy, you see… maybe you've read my previous exploration report? It's, uh… quite famous."

The Master stared at him for some time, then glanced at the Lost with clear eyes, and shook her head dejectedly.

"All this… because of one clueless fool…"

'Yes, yes... I am a pathetic, useless fool. Believe it!'

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Master Welthe? I am very sorry for the trouble I've caused, but… uh… what is going on? And when are you going to release us?"

She suddenly let out a stifled laugh, then looked at him with a dark, furious expression:

"Release you? If you knew what your actions have caused, you would have begged me to keep you in this cell. At least that fiend can't get to you here… no, the two of you will remain locked up until we deal with the mess you've made. And we will deal with it, believe me."

That was not exactly the answer Sunny wanted to hear, but at least it gave him some information.

Mordret wasn't contained yet... rather, he and the Valor forces seemed to be in some sort of a stalemate.

Master Welthe gritted her teeth, then turned away.

However, before leaving, she stopped for a moment and then said, her voice grim:

"Now that the temple is sealed, no one but Lord Cormac can unseal it, anyway. With the Gateway destroyed, there's no escape. Where would you even go?"

With that, she clenched her fists and left the chamber. The four Lost followed, closing the door behind them.

Sunny stared at it for a while, a bleak expression on his face.

'No one but Lord Cormac can unseal it…'

"Crap!"

The Saint was not supposed to return until a month from now!

He looked at Cassie, then at their cage, and lastly at the glowing runes.

This was going to be a long and terrible month…

Chapter-568: Full Circle

He sat back down, waited for a while, and then turned to Cassie:

"Did you take a look at her Attributes?"

She sat down, too, and sighed.

"Yes. Her, the four Lost with her. Sir Pierce, too. I also saw the name and Rank of their Aspects."

Sunny frowned.

"What? Since when can you read Aspects, too?"

The blind girl shrugged.

"Since my Awakening."

He stared at her for a bit.

'What a useful Ability…'

In worse news, if she had not known some of his secrets before, she surely knew them now.

'...How infuriating.'

Sunny grimaced, lingered for a bit, and then said:

"Good. Chances are, we'll need that information before all of this is over."

He didn't press her for answers yet, since there was a lot he had to think about.

Some more time passed with both of them remaining silent. After a

while, the door of the chamber opened once more, and the familiar four Lost entered. The one with a bandaged head was carrying a tray of food and a waterskin.

He studied them for a few moments, a cold expression on his handsome face, and then threw the food and the waterskin through the iron bars without approaching the cage.

Sunny suppressed his anger and opened his mouth, assuming the persona of a cowardly researcher:

"Hey! Sir… uh… sir Awakened! Can you tell us what is going on? Please, we don't even know what is wrong!"

The sentinel glanced at him darkly and spat in a commanding tone:

"Silence!"

His voice was clear and strong, full of arrogant confidence… and deep animosity toward the two of them.

Without saying another word, the Lost left, once again locking the door behind them.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly lowered his gaze and glanced at the food that rolled down the slope of the dome to his feet.

Then, suddenly, he threw his head back and laughed loudly.

"Oh… oh, gods! Never thought I'll be eating this crap again…"

Right in front of him, reflecting the blue glow of the runes, two colorless tubes of synthpaste were lying on the floor.

He knew their shape all too well.

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They had a late supper, which consisted of a synthetic paste that had the consistency of mud and tasted about the same. Still, this vile invention was cheap to produce and supposed to contain all the

nutrients one needed to — barely — survive.

Sunny had not missed the damned sludge at all.

In the outskirts, the easiest food to get was called a "universal ration pack"... or simply a rat pack. It contained a tube of synthpaste, a cheap water filter, and several dry, tasteless crackers. This was what he mostly ate before becoming an Awakened, so now, Sunny felt as though his life had come full circle.

Such irony...

After a while, tired and weak without the essence sustaining their bodies, they decided to sleep.

The flat space in the center of the cage was so small that Sunny and Cassie had to settle with their backs against each other. With nothing but two layers of thin fabric separating their skin, Sunny could feel the heartbeat reverberating through her lithe body.

...The cage was cold and chilly, but at least his back was warm.

They lay in silence for a while, trying to fall asleep.

Before they did, however, Cassie suddenly spoke:

"Sunny…"

Her voice was quiet and hesitant.

"How… how is she doing? Do you know?"

He kept his eyes closed and remained silent for a few moments, then said with no particular emotion:

"She is doing great. She is a devil already. Now stop bothering me."

Cassie sighed, and didn't say anything else.

…In the middle of the night — if it was night outside — he suddenly woke up, disturbed by a sudden change in her breathing. Through the thin fabric of their clothes, he could feel the blind girl's body

tense up, her breathing rugged and uneven.

Sunny hesitated, then turned around and looked at Cassie.

In the pale glow of the runes, her delicate face seemed white and bloodless. It was contorted in a tortured grimace, with beads of sweat appearing on her forehead. Her eyes were moving hectically behind the eyelids.

He lingered, not knowing what to do.

It was obvious that Cassie was having a vision, and that like most of her visions, this one was painful and terrifying. Was he supposed to wake her up? Or would it do more harm than good?

Before he could decide, she suddenly sat up with a stifled yelp. Her chest was rising and falling wildly, and there was a panicked expression on her face.

The blind girl raised her hands and tried to feel her surroundings, clearly not quite remembering where she was.

Sunny caught one of them, making Cassie flinch, and said darkly:

"Take a hold of yourself, damn it. You're in a cage in Night Temple. Stop thrashing around."

She froze, surrendering to his iron grip. After a while, Cassie took a deep breath and said weakly:

"...I'm alright."

He let her go, picked up the mostly empty waterskin, and put it onto her hand.

The blind girl drank the last of their water and closed her eyes, her breathing slowly returning to normal.

Sunny waited for a minute, and then asked in a gloomy tone:

"Another vision?"

She silently nodded.

A dark grin appeared on his face.

"What? Did we die again?"

Cassie shook her head, then opened her eyes and frowned.

"No… no, this time I saw someone else."

She put the waterskin on the floor, hugged her knees, and spoke again, her voice still tense, but now much calmer:

"It was one of the Lost — the man with grey eyes who advised Lady Welthe. He was in front of a large crucible, throwing shards of broken mirrors into the fire. There were thousands of them, all reflecting his image. Only… at some point, one of the reflections stopped."

She shivered.

"The Lost stopped, too, and stared at the motionless reflection, his eyes full of utter terror. It was as though he was paralyzed by fear. He opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out of his mouth. After that, he didn't move anymore… but the reflection finally did. It raised its head, and… and smiled."

Cassie grew silent, and then added, her voice trembling:

"That smile filled me with so much dread that all I could think about was to run away. But I couldn't. That… that was when I woke up."

Sunny looked at her for a while, thinking. His face was cold and grim.

It wasn't hard to understand what the vision was about. Mordret's Aspect was somehow tied to mirrors, after all… but what did it all mean? What were his powers, exactly?

He sighed and turned away.

"It's fine. You did well. Go back to sleep, if you can."

She listened to him and slowly lay down. However, Sunny could tell by her breathing that the blind girl was wide awake.

He couldn't sleep, too.

…In the morning, the door of their cell opened, and the same group of Lost brought them more food.

Only, this time, there were only three of them.

The man with grey eyes was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter-569: On the Seventh Day

The three Lost seemed to be in a better shape than they had been the day before — their armor was cleaned, and their wounds were properly tended to. However, somehow, they looked worse to wear. Their faces were paler, their movements were full of tension, and there was a strange darkness hiding in their eyes.

Only the sentinel who had spoken to Sunny before was the same. If anything, his cold resolve seemed to have grown stronger… as did his silent hostility. Without saying a word, he threw the tubes of syntpaste into the cage, then pointed at the waterskin laying on the floor near Cassie.

Sunny tossed the empty waterskin out, and received a new one in return.

"Sir! Can you please tell us what is going on? Where is your, uh... fourth friend? Did something happen?"

The sentinel stared at him with a heavy, grim expression. When he answered, his voice was steady and even:

"Don't speak unless spoken to."

With that, the Lost left. The door of the cell locked with a loud click, the flame of the oil lamp trembled, and everything became silent once again.

Sunny sighed.

"...What an unfriendly fellow."

Just like that, their imprisonment started.

There were no windows in the stone chamber, so it was almost impossible to track the passage of time. Their only hint was the appearance of the three Lost, who brought them food and water once every day, and sometimes changed the oil in the lantern.

Sunny and Cassie spent the first few days in silence and tense, grim anticipation. They slept back to back, sharing the heat of their bodies to overcome the chilling cold of the prison cell, and suffered through the daytime without speaking to each other unless absolutely necessary. Both were waiting for something disastrous to happen.

However, nothing did.

The Night Temple had not shaken again, and nothing came through the heavy door to either set them free or destroy them. Neither Master Welthe nor Master Pierce had visited the enchanted chamber, as well, as if Sunny and Cassie were completely forgotten. The stone cell was silent and unchanging.

However, they could still tell that something sinister and dire was going on outside. The evidence was in how the three Lost that brought them food — their only connection to the rest of the world — looked and behaved.

With each day, two of them seemed more and more frightened, while the third grew increasingly cold and grim. No matter how much Sunny tried to get the sentinel to speak, the arrogant warrior refused to tell him anything, and only glared at the prisoners through the iron bars of the cage, his eyes full of ire.

Their actions changed, too. If before all three used to look at Sunny and Cassie while delivering the food, now only the sentinel did. The other two stood facing the door, their weapons drawn.

…Sometimes, their hands were trembling.

Realizing that nothing was going to change any time soon, Sunny had to reluctantly change his behavior. He shared everything he knew about Mordret with Cassie, and learned everything she remembered about the Night Temple in return. With nothing else to do but teach each other, they went over every little detail many times over… only

to end up with nothing.

No new clues, no deeper understanding, not even a good guess or two. It was simply a dead end.

For now…

On the seventh day, the three Lost arrived as usual. The sentinel walked forward and threw the tubes of synthpaste into the cage, while the other two assumed defensive positions behind his back. Their eyes seemed dark and hollow.

However, before Sunny could toss the empty waterskin outside, a chilling scream suddenly resounded in the corridor outside the door. A long, drowning shriek echoed from the cold stones, full of torment and indescribable agony.

How could a human throat produce such a sound?

The Lost tensed and gripped their weapons, one of them taking an involuntary step back.

The sentinel snarled and pushed the man in the back.

"Get a hold of yourself, cowards! Remember your duty!"

With that, he threw the waterskin to Sunny and rushed outside, a slender sword appearing in his hand from a whirlpool of dancing sparks of light. The others gritted their teeth and followed, shutting the door behind them.

The flame of the oil lamp trembled.

…On the next day, when the door opened again, only two Lost walked through it.

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One of the surviving Lost looked like a walking corpse. There were no wounds on his body, but his eyes were dull and glassy. He glanced at Sunny and Cassie lifelessly, then turned around and raised his weapon, staring at the open door with tired dread.

Even the arrogant sentinel seemed a bit… diminished. His handsome face was still cold and resolute, but there was a slight weakness to how his shoulders were set, and a slight uncertainty to his movements.

He tossed the tubes of synthpaste and the water inside the cage, not even waiting for Sunny to return the other two waterskins. Sunny wanted to try to get the Lost to speak to him again, as usual, but then thought better of it.

There was a sharp edge in the man's eyes that made the idea of pushing him even a little seem too dangerous.

The two Lost left, leaving the prisoners alone again.

Sunny stared at the door and the orange flame of the oil lamp dancing beside it for a few minutes, then shivered and turned away.

Their jailers returned several more times. With each day, they looked more disheveled and exhausted, the darkness in their eyes growing deeper and deeper. A few times, Sunny could hear strange, disturbing sounds coming from the corridor, but the two Lost did not seem to react to them at all.

A week later, the food did not arrive for an especially long time. Sunny glared gloomily at the door, feeling pangs of hunger torment his empty stomach. One tube of synthpaste a day was not nearly enough to satiate him, so he was always hungry… just like he had been in the past, living on the streets in the outskirts.

Hours passed, but the two Lost were nowhere to be seen.

'Where the hell are they...'

Then, something suddenly crashed into the door from the outside with a loud bang. A bit of dust fell from the ceiling, and then, everything became silent once more.

Sunny remained motionless for a few moments, then slowly looked down.

Something was flowing from beneath the door, streaming down the

slope of the dome toward the cage. In the dim orange glow of the oil lantern, the liquid seemed almost black.

But he knew its smell too well…

Blood. It was human blood.

…After that day, no one came to feed them anymore.

Chapter-570: Thirst

Sunny looked at the stream of blood that was getting closer and closer to the cage, then glanced back at the door and waited, wondering if someone… or something… would burst through it and enter the cell.

But nothing did. After that first loud bang, everything stayed eerily quiet. Seconds passed, then minutes. Finally, he slowly turned away from the door and looked at Cassie.

"Do you smell it?"

She lingered for a moment, then nodded.

"...Blood."

Sunny remained motionless for a bit, then walked back to his usual place and sat down. His face was grim. After a while, he said in a dark tone:

"We are going to need to start rationing water."

Humans could survive for a long time without food, but water… water was much more precious. Without it, a healthy human could die in a matter of days.

And there were very few more agonizing ways to go.

Cassie turned her head, then asked somberly:

"Why? Do you think that they are going to just leave us here?"

Sunny opened his mouth to retort that she was the one who could see the future. But in the end, he held his tongue.

"...Just in case."

They had one full waterskin left. As Awakened, they would also be able to last longer without water than mundane humans — especially Sunny, whose body was strengthened by three cores, Blood Weave, and his shadows.

But would that be long enough?

There was no way to know.

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly, then tried to meditate.

Time crawled slowly. Their hunger grew, but no one came to bring them food. With their last connection to the outside world gone, it was impossible to tell what day it was. Sunny and Cassie remained in the barely illuminated darkness alone, waiting for something to happen, or slept while shivering from the cold.

It wasn't long before their water ran out. The waterskin wasn't that large, to begin with.

...Then, came the thirst.

Sunny thought that he knew what madness felt like, but after spending several days — at least he thought that a few had passed — without drinking anything, he learned that there was a completely different realm of crazed delirium.

The feeling of thirst was absolutely maddening, torturous, and suffocating. His throat hurt as if it was being cut, his lips had dried and cracked, and so did his tongue. His head was full of pulsating pain, and his muscles were experiencing excruciating cramps. All he could think about was water, water, water…

The worst part of it all, however, was the fear. Fear that he was going to die in this cursed cage like a dog, forgotten and discarded. Maybe one day someone would open the heavy door, and find his desiccated corpse reaching hopelessly and pathetically toward it through the iron bars…

Sunny had tried everything he could think of to get out of the cage, but nothing he had done helped. The only result was that his condition worsened even further.

By then, his throat and mouth felt as though they were on fire, and his entire body ached terribly. He felt weak and lethargic, and his vision was starting to blur. Sunny spent most of his time staring at the orange flame of the oil lamp, because it was more or less the only thing he could see clearly.

Then, it disappeared, too.

The stone cell became even darker, with only the ghostly, dim glow of the runes illuminating the iron bars of the cage.

'...The oil ran out.'

Sunny closed his eyes.

Was it really hopeless?

No, he couldn't give up… he refused to…

In all this suffering and despair, the only thing that kept him somewhat sane was the fact that Cassie was right there with him, going through the same hell. At least… at least he wasn't alone.

Despite all the complicated emotions and the heavy burden of past sins, sharing his pain with someone had made it if not bearable, then at least a little easier. Neither of them would have been able to endure the agony and the terror of not knowing whether they were going to live or die, the fear of the unknown, alone. But together, the two of them managed to persevere, somehow.

Maybe just to not let the other see them break first…

Sunny didn't know how many days had passed since the flame of the oil lantern died out. Time lost its meaning a while ago. All he knew was the thirst, the pain, and the stubborn, spiteful will to hold on just a little bit longer.

…At some point, he opened his eyes in the darkness and stared at the blurry blue glow of the sorcerous runes. Then, he turned his head and looked at Cassie, who was sleeping in his arms.

There was a sound… a sound coming from behind the door.

Sunny wanted to tell Cassie to wake up, but his throat was so dry that no sound came out of it. All it did was bring him more pain. He gritted his teeth, then shook her gently, waited for her to open her eyes, and carefully placed a finger on her lips.

He wanted her to remain quiet.

The blind girl hesitated for a few moments, then nodded.

They let go of each other and shakily rose to their feet. By that point, the faint sound became more clear… it was as though something sharp was scraping against stones as it was being dragged across them slowly.

Scrrrrish… scrrrrish… scrrrrrish… scrrrriiiiish...

The haunting, grating sound was drawing closer and closer.

Finally, it reached to just beyond the cell and stopped abruptly. Then, they heard another scrape, this one much smaller, and the click of the door's lock.

It opened, and Sunny saw a blurry silhouette standing at the threshold of the stone chamber. Half-blinded by the thirst, he couldn't tell who, or what, it was.

...But the smell of blood was back.

Only now, it was much, much stronger…

Chapter-571: Don't Make a Sound

Sunny stood motionlessly, gathering whatever strength he had left… which was far too little. Cassie was silent, too, a tense expression on her pale face.

With his vision compromised and his shadow sense limited to the circle of runes glowing around the cage, all Sunny could see was a blurry silhouette. He was almost sure that it was a human… however, something about the dark figure was wrong.

Utterly, terribly wrong.

...A strong smell of blood assaulted his nostrils.

The silhouette swayed, and then took a step forward. The scraping sound resounded once again, coming from it. Sunny strained his eyes, and thought that he had noticed a slender sword being dragged behind the person. A hint of recognition appeared in his clouded mind, but in the next moment, a sudden burst of creaky, gurgling laughter threw his thoughts into a spin.

Sunny shivered.

'That... voice…'

The silhouette took another step forward, coming to the point where the flat surface of the floor gave place to the downward slope of the dome. Coincidentally, that was the moment when the dim glow of the runes finally reached it.

Sunny flinched.

'C—curses…'

A familiar face was looming in the darkness above him. Even through the haze clouding his sight, Sunny managed to recognize the arrogant sentinel who had locked them in this cage a long, long time ago.

Only now, that cold and handsome man was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, he looked broken and gaunt, his face contorted in a demented grin.

But much worse than that…

In the place where the sentinel's eyes used to be, two bloody pits were gaping, crimson streams flowing down his cheeks like tears. His fingers were marred with blood, too.

As Sunny recoiled, the Lost laughed again, and then suddenly clawed at his face, his laughter turning into a stifled groan, and then into a whisper:

"...can't get me anymore… can't, can't... get me... I tricked him..."

Then, the lunatic abruptly froze. Slowly, his head turned, and the bloody pits of his eyes stared directly at the cage. A moment later, a grimace of hatred appeared on his face.

"You! You! It is all your fault, yours! You let him free!"

Sunny felt weak and barely able to stand, and he was suffering too much to have any energy for fear. So, although it was obvious that the sentinel had returned to exact revenge and kill them, he didn't mind.

Instead, he welcomed it.

'Good… good! Come… come here then. Just come here and open the door. You can try to kill me all you want. Just open the damned door, you wretch!'

As long as the door was open, they could escape.

The Lost swayed again, then made a move to step forward… and stopped. His sword fell to the floor with a clang.

'Damn you!'

…Instead, a whirlpool of sparks swirled around his hands, and a curved bow appeared in them.

Sunny's heart grew cold.

'No, no, no...'

The sentinel whispered:

"Die, vermin…"

With that, he drew the string of the bow. As soon as he did, a ghostly arrow appeared on it, its tip long and sharp as a razor.

Sunny held his breath and stared at the tip of the arrow, then slowly turned his head and looked at Cassie, who stood motionlessly beside him. His face grew solemn.

'Don't make a sound… please, don't make a sound…'

A moment later, he heard the sound of the string, and saw the arrow streak above the blind girl's shoulder, the wind throwing a few strands of her hair into the air, and shatter against the stones.

Cassie flinched, but remained absolutely silent.

The sentinel frowned.

"Alive? I know that you are still alive… but not for long, now…"

He drew the bow again, and sent another ghostly arrow flying.

This time, it flew mere centimeters above Sunny's head. For the first time in his life, he felt actually thankful for his short stature…

But the crazed Lost wasn't done.

Sunny turned his head and stared directly at him. A ghastly smile suddenly appeared on the sentinel's face.

"...got you now."

He drew the bow again, and then lowered it, aiming directly at Sunny's heart.

Sunny did not move a muscle.

A moment before the Lost released the string, something small and swift suddenly dashed toward him from behind, and bit his leg ferociously.

...It was the Covetous Coffer.

Back when everything started, Sunny had left it in the interrogation room on purpose. He couldn't control a Memory like he would an Echo, but the Coffer was still able to follow simple commands. The command it had received from Sunny in those moments was to hide, and then find him.

And then wait.

The poor thing had loitered near the locked door of the cell for several weeks, hiding every time anyone approached. And now, it was finally able to receive a new command.

'Attack!'

The box scurried from its hiding place, reach the cell, and ran through the door on its eight short iron legs, just in time to sink its sharp triangular teeth into the sentinel's heel. They easily pierced the steel of his armored boot. Blood spurted into the air, and with a surprised shriek, the man stumbled forward, fell, and rolled down the slope of the dome, crashing into the bars of the cage.

The arrow flashed past Sunny, missing him by a hair's breadth.

But he did not care, already moving.

As soon as the damage was done, Sunny dismissed the Covetous Coffer, and before the runes could devour the tiny amount of shadow essence returned to him by that act, sent all of it into his hurting muscles.

And now, he was dashing up the slope toward where the Lost was

trying to get back to his feet.

Before he could, however, Sunny was already upon him.

He thrust his hands through the bars, wrapped one arm around the man's neck, pressed him against the cage, and used the other hand to lock him into a stranglehold.

Sunny was weakened by the runes, the hunger, and the thirst… but he still had three cores, and three shadows wrapped around his body. His strength was fueled by fury, desperation, and cold, murderous will.

All of it was barely enough to hold the struggling sentinel in place.

The two men struggled furiously, one trying to break free, the other trying to squeeze the very life out of his enemy. Sunny used everything he had, and then a bit more, strangling the Lost with all the strength he had left in his gaunt, starved body. He knew that there was not going to be another chance. He had to kill this man in order to survive.

…And even more important than that, he simply wanted to.

So, he bit his lip, feeling drops of blood flowing into his dry mouth, and pulled, pulled, pulled.

After what felt like an eternity, when his vision had gone almost entirely black and his muscles were on the verge of collapsing, he felt something snap under his grip, and then the body of his enemy suddenly grew limp.

The sentinel was dead…

Probably…

Sunny let out a shaky breath, let go of the man's corpse, and fell back, sliding down to the center of the dome.

He couldn't stand up anymore.

In truth, he couldn't even open his eyes. Not that he would be able to

see anything. The fight had taken the last of his strength.

His chest rose and fell, every breath sending a wave of agony through his body. He didn't think that he could move.

'...I'm done.'

Through the haze, Sunny heard someone walk unsteadily past him, and some time later, a loud click. Then, two small, weak hands grabbed him by the shoulders, and Sunny felt himself being dragged across the cold stones.

He didn't quite understand what was happening.

However… soon, his whole body shuddered, and a dark grin slowly appeared on his face.

A raging, revitalizing flood of shadow essence was flowing into his three cores.

...He was free!

Chapter-572: Sweeter than Heaven

Sunny remained motionless for a while, then took a look into his Soul Sea. It didn't seem lifeless and drained anymore. The three black suns of his cores loomed above in a perfect triangle, burning with furious dark flames, and the tranquil sea was in turmoil, replete with raging energy.

He glanced at the shadow of the sentinel that had joined the silent ranks of his brethren, made a grimace, and closed his eyes.

His body was still weak and on the verge of shutting down, but now, satiated with essence, it was not completely useless anymore. He concentrated, then summoned the Soul Serpent and circulated the essence through its coils, feeling strength return to his aching muscles. His lethargy receded a little.

Finally, Sunny opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Cassie. The blind girl was laying on the floor beside him, just outside the circle of runes, completely spent. She must have retrieved the keys from the sentinel's corpse, unlocked the door, then dragged him out of the cage. Sunny didn't know how she had managed to carry him all the way in her terrible condition, but she had.

Now, Cassie was barely breathing. However, the color was slowly returning to her face — she was regenerating her soul essence, too.

Just the effort of turning his head made Sunny feel dizzy. He rested for a few moments, breathing heavily, then summoned Saint.

The taciturn knight appeared out of his shadow, her ruby eyes burning in the darkness. He stared at her from below for a second, then gave a silent command:

'Close the door. Guard us.'

The demon silently turned and walked away, her steps echoing in the silence of the stone cell. Sunny rested some more, then gritted his teeth and tried to sit up. He succeeded on the third try.

Water, water… he needed water… all of his being lusted for a single drop of the precious liquid…

A swirl of sparks danced around his hand, and then, the most glorious thing he had ever seen appeared in it.

It was a dazzling, beautiful, sublime bottle made out of patterned blue glass.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then crawled closer to Cassie, held up her head, and brought the Endless Spring to her cracked lips. As soon as the first drops of water fell into her mouth, the blind girl opened her eyes, flinched, and then drank greedily. At some point, she raised one hand and grabbed his own, as if afraid that he would take the bottle away.

Sunny observed her, his own throat spasming in pain. Finally, he wrestled his hand free and drank his own share.

…The cold water was, without a shadow of a doubt, the sweetest and most magnificent thing he had ever tasted. Drinking it was more euphoric than being reborn during the Awakening, and much more rewarding by far. With each sip, he could feel life returning into his tortured body, as if he was rising from the dead.

In these moments, he was probably the happiest he had ever been.

After both of them satiated their thirst, they fell to the floor, dead tired. Sunny and Cassie were revatilized by the water, but mentally exhausted and utterly drained.

It wasn't long before they fell asleep.

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When Sunny woke up, he felt much better. He was still in a rather

bad shape and weak from hunger, his stomach pulsing with pain, but at least not dying anymore.

He sat up, drank more water, and looked around the cell.

Cassie was still sound asleep, laying on the cold stone floor. She looked to be in a worse condition than him, but there was color to her face, and her breathing was calm and steady. Even though the blind girl did not possess the miraculous Blood Weave, she was still a powerful Awakened. Her body was much more resilient and quicker to heal than that of a mundane human.

Sunny suspected that in a couple of days, both of them would be mostly back to normal.

…Provided that nothing else happens.

What were the chances of that?

He glanced at Saint, who was guarding the heavy door, then at the cage and the corpse of the sentinel laying near it. His face became contorted by a grimace of disgust.

Sunny sighed, then closed his eyes and sent one of his shadows to take a look outside the door. The long corridor was empty and submerged in darkness. Nothing moved there, and nothing seemed to pose any threat. The only thing he saw was another corpse — this one belonging to the partner of the dead sentinel — sprawled near the cell, terribly mangled and in the early stages of decomposition.

Sunny stared at it for a while, then commanded the shadow to return.

The silence outside was almost eerie.

At that moment, Cassie stirred and opened her eyes. She sat up and groaned quietly, then slowly turned her head in his direction.

Her second Aspect Ability must have returned. Or maybe she just located him by the smell… after weeks spent in the iron cage, both of them reeked terribly enough to scare away a pack of hungry wolves.

Sunny handed her the Endless Spring, stared at the bottle in the

delicate hand of the blind girl for a few moments, then turned away.

Cassie drank the water, coughed, then returned the Memory and asked, her voice raspy:

"...What are we going to do now?"

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then shrugged.

"First, we need to find some food. Once we are full and strong enough to fight… we'll see. Gather information, assess the situation, then act."

She nodded, then slowly rose to her feet. The Quiet Dancer appeared in her hand in the glow of white sparks.

Sunny stood up, too, and headed toward the door.

Saint moved aside, allowing him to open it.

Standing at the threshold, he hesitated for a few seconds, and then took a step forward. A dark expression appeared on his face.

...Sunny knew that he had to be careful. But he also felt entitled to some vengeance of his own.

Chapter-573: Hunger

Stepping over the corpse laying at the doorstep of their cell, Sunny and Cassie entered the dark, empty corridor and stopped for a few short moments. They listened tensely to the echoing silence that reigned over it, and then cautiously moved forward.

Most humans would have felt lost in the impenetrable darkness, but neither of them found it uncomfortable. Stepping softly, they walked toward the entrance to the closest stairwell, the shadows gliding ahead of them to scout for potential dangers.

Sunny didn't let the shadows go too far, though, knowing that he might need their help at a moment's notice.

In the past weeks, he had learned everything that Cassie knew about the Night Temple, so there was a clear mental picture of its interior in his head — the parts of the great cathedral that the blind girl was familiar with, at least.

Currently, they were at the lowest levels of one of its seven belfries, deep below the outward ring of the main structure. There were two other belfries in the outward ring, and both the ring itself and the three towers descending from it remained uninhabited. They were mostly empty or occupied by storage rooms, workshops, and other facilities the Lost used to maintain the Citadel.

…Still, there was no way of knowing what might have changed inside the temple since their imprisonment, and what danger lay ahead, in the darkness.

They moved from one level to another, not meeting a single living soul. Here and there, signs of battle could be seen — the furniture was smashed to pieces, the walls scraped by sharp blades or cracked, a few of them completely shattered. The floor was stained with blood, but there were no more corpses around.

All they found were a clump of torn, bloodied clothes and several overturned tables, as though someone had desperately tried to build a barricade. Whoever it had been, it didn't seem as though they succeeded — the makeshift barricade was broken, and there was a lot of blood on the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling behind it.

Sunny and Cassie walked past, their expressions turning somber.

After a while, Sunny finally discovered a storage room full of wooden crates behind one of the locked doors, each containing hundreds of tubes of synthpaste. His mouth instantly watered.

'Food…'

No matter how much he hated the muddy sludge, right now, he was ready to kill for a single mouthful.

Sunny and Cassie opened the storage room with one of the keys attached to the keyring they had picked up from the body of the sentinel, entered it, and then locked the door behind them.

Both of them were starving, but before Cassie had a chance to grab a tube, Sunny stopped her.

"Don't eat more than one. And eat it slowly."

She hesitated, then turned to him with a frown.

"Why? I'm so hungry..."

He shook his head and sat down on one of the crates.

"If you eat too much, too quickly after going without food for a long time, you might die."

The blind girl tilted her head.

"What? Why? How do you know?"

Sunny opened a tube and shrugged.

"...Seen it happen."

That was just general knowledge among the street kids in the outskirts. However, Cassie had probably never faced real hunger — even in the Dark City, the inhabitants of the outer settlement had been fed generously by Changing Star and her hunting party during her time there.

Sunny was surprised, actually, that normal children didn't learn about such stuff in school.

The blind girl lingered for a few moments, but listened to his advice in the end.

Each of them slowly ate one tube of synthpaste, and then rested for a while. After that, Sunny summoned the Covetous Coffer, patted it on the lid, and loaded a couple of crates into the small box.

"What a good little box you are! Good job, Coffer!"

Then, feeling refreshed and energized, the strength slowly returning to their starved bodies, they moved the crates around and took turns washing themselves with the help of the Endless Spring.

Sunny went first. Taking off the reeking clothes and scrubbing his skin with cold water felt heavenly. When he was done, he summoned the Undying Chain, and finally felt like himself again.

After that, he sat by the door quietly and, using one of the shadows, kept watch on the corridor outside.

In the dead silence on the stone belfry, Sunny couldn't help but hear every sound around him — the rustle of the crude tunic against Cassie's skin as she took it off and dropped it on the ground, the murmur of the water as it flowed down her petite, supple body, and the small sighs of relief she made as the weight of several weeks of imprisonment was washed away by it.

After a while, she joined him, clad once again in her blue coat and polished armor.

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then said:

"Come closer."

Cassie tilted her head a little, then did as he told. Sunny reached toward one of the extinguished oil lamps, and then proceed to rub her cuirass, pauldron, and other steel elements of the armor with soot.

The blind girl frowned, but didn't stop him.

"...Are you trying to make it non-reflective?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. Just… just in case."

They still didn't know what powers Mordret possessed, but whatever they were, mirrors and reflections obviously had something to do with it. The Undying Chain was forged out of bleak steel, but Cassie's armor was too lustrous for him to feel at ease.

…That was also the reason why he had not summoned the Cruel Sight yet. The silver blade of the enchanted spear was like a clear mirror, and he wasn't sure what might happen if he did.

After Sunny was done covering up the polished steel of Cassie's armor with soot, they rested for a while, ate a little more, and left the storage room behind. It was time to ascend the belfry and return to the outward ring of the Night Temple.

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As soon as they stepped out of the stairwell and found themselves between the black walls of the main structure of the Night Temple again, a terrible smell assaulted their nostrils. Sunny grimaced, and then covered his nose with a hand.

This was the familiar, vile smell of death.

Just like the belfry, the outward ring was submerged in darkness. No one had bothered to change the oil in the lamps, and there were no windows to let in the light. The corridors here were wider, and their adornments richer. However, just like before, everything was silent, and there was nobody around.

Sunny shivered.

'...Just where is everyone?'

The Night Temple seemed completely deserted. At first, when they had been hungry and weak, he was glad for it. But now, the absence of people was starting to make him nervous.

What the hell had happened here while they were locked up?

Moving slowly, the two of them cautiously headed in the direction of the gates leading to the outside.

…It wasn't long before Sunny noticed a trail of dried blood on the stones beneath his feet, as though someone dead or dying had been dragged across them. Coincidentally, the trail led in the same direction. Soon, the smell of death grew stronger, making it hard to breathe.

Sunny and Cassie entered the hall separating them from the gates, and froze.

His face darkened.

'That… that is not good…'

Chapter-574: Black Altar

Before the gates of the temple, a large hall stood, submerged in darkness. The air was permeated with the smell of rot, and at least a dozen eviscerated bodies lay on the cold stones, staring into nothingness with their empty eyes.

Sunny had long become accustomed to such sights, so he wasn't too bothered by it. The implication, however, left him feeling cold.

'Damnation…'

He entered the hall, both Saint and the Serpent emerging silently from his shadows. Cassie followed, gripping the hilt of the Quiet Dancer so hard that her fingers turned white.

Sunny walked over to the nearest corpse, held his breath, and knelt beside it, studying its wounds. Then, with a grim expression, he moved over to the next one and did the same.

It took him some time to check on each of the slain Lost, and by the end, his eyes were full of darkness.

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, then asked, her voice tense and trembling:

"...How did they die?"

He lingered for a second, then shook his head.

"Sword wounds."

Each of the fallen sentinels was killed with one precise, fatal strike. However, most of them were terribly mutilated and covered in multiple wounds — none of them lethal, but all aimed at inflicting the maximum amount of pain.

The killer, whoever it was, wanted his victims to suffer before they died.

Well… Sunny was pretty sure that he knew who the killer was.

Mordret. The man — or thing — that he had set free.

It seemed that the Prince of Nothing had a sadistic streak about him.

…But that wasn't the problem.

From everything that Sunny had learned before, he assumed that Mordret possessed a bizarre and powerful Aspect that allowed him to deal either mind or soul damage to other living beings. That made him extremely dangerous.

The prerequisite for this Ability seemed to be looking the prisoner of the Night Temple in the eyes… which was good, since both Sunny and Cassie could naturally counter it — Sunny by fighting with his eyes closed, Cassie by simply being blind.

However, these Lost had clearly died in a ferocious and bloody melee. That meant that, on top of everything else, Mordret was a fighter of incredible skill… skilled and powerful enough to not only kill a dozen experienced Awakened with a sword, but also to play with his victims before he did.

Just how was Sunny supposed to win against someone like that?

He sighed, then walked past the corpses and approached the gate.

Master Welthe had told them that the Citadel was sealed, and no one except for Saint Cormac would be able to open it. However… Sunny had to check for himself.

He wrapped all three shadows around his body and tried to push open the gates, but to no avail. The heavy doors didn't budge even when Saint joined him. None of the keys their jailers had carried were of any use, too… there wasn't even a keyhole to insert them.

Sunny looked beneath the surface of the gates, hoping to see the same type of primitive weave he had seen in the door of the Ebony

Tower. But there was none.

"Curse it."

He gave the gates a good kick, then turned around and walked back to Cassie in frustration.

"...I guess we aren't getting out of here until the Saint arrives."

Which would happen in a week, at the earliest.

Would they even be able to survive that long?

The blind girl frowned, then asked with uncertainty:

"Where to, then?"

Sunny thought for a few seconds.

Since they were already stuck in this damned place… why not try and accomplish the task they had come here to complete, in the first place?

"...Let's go check on the Gateway."

Perhaps the ivory knife was still there, somewhere.

Leaving the scene of the cruel massacre behind, the two of them headed deeper into the stone bowels of the Night Temple.

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It took them a long time to cross the outward ring and enter the central temple. The distance itself was not that considerable, but the bizarre interior of the cathedral was disorienting and sprawling, resembling a vast, convoluted maze of black stone. They also had to remain cautious and move slowly so as to not walk into an ambush.

The darkness, silence, and eerie emptiness of the deserted Citadel were slowly stretching their already tense nerves. Both Sunny and Cassie had not recovered from their ordeal completely, so they had to stop and rest a couple of times, drinking water and eating small

amounts of synthpaste.

They also encountered more morbid remnants of the struggle that had been going on inside the Night Temple while they were slowly dying inside the cage — rotting corpses of the Lost, signs of bloodshed and destruction, as well as things that were too strange and vile to be explained by any kind of sane logic.

It was as though they were traveling through the workshop of a mad butcher.

With each minute that passed, Sunny grew more and more grim.

For the first time since this whole disaster started, he actually began to question the moral implications of what his actions had led to. Even if he had been an unwilling accomplice, Mordret only managed to escape because of him.

Had Sunny accidentally released an unspeakable evil upon the world?

He wasn't sure how to feel about that. On one hand, he didn't really care about the world… but on the other hand, Sunny didn't like to leave behind a mess without cleaning it up. It was just basic decency.

A bit conflicted, he sent the shadow ahead, made sure that everything was fine, and finally led Cassie into the grand hall of the Night Temple.

This place was both magnificent and uncanny. It was vast and full of darkness, reminding him of his home in the Dark City... the only difference was that this tenebrous cathedral was built upside down.

Far above them, the ceiling was flat and stretched into the distance. The floor, on the contrary, arched downward like a giant bowl, with load-bearing stone seams protruding from it like bridges and roads. The hall was silent and somber, and absolutely empty.

In its center, there was a wide stone platform. It was covered in rubble, large pieces of black obsidian laying in piles where the black altar had once stood.

'They really destroyed it…'

Sunny stared at the shattered altar, still not quite believing that the Gateway was really obliterated.

What madness was this?

They lingered for a few moments, and then descended toward the platform. There, Sunny spent some time sifting through the rubble, hoping to find the ivory knife.

But it was nowhere to be found. All he found was broken obsidian, and pieces of Storm God's shattered statue.

Either the knife had never been there, to begin with, or Mordret had gotten to it first.

'Curse it!'

Sunny turned the head of the statue, looked beneath it, and then stood up, staring into the empty eyes of the dead goddess with dark fury.

'Damned liar… a prince of lies, that's who he is!'

As he was boiling with rage, Cassie suddenly took a step forward and touched him on the shoulder.

Then, she pointed toward the other end of the grand hall and whispered:

"I hear footsteps. Someone… someone is coming."

Sunny stared into the darkness, his hand itching to summon a weapon. His eyes gleamed dangerously.

"...Let them come."

Chapter-575: Confrontation

Sunny was tired of the silence, the emptiness, and the quiet dread. The fear of the unknown had been pressing heavily onto his heart, and for a short moment, he wanted for this burdensome uncertainty to end, no matter how violent and dangerous the resulting confrontation would be.

But then, he had to grit his teeth and remind himself that giving in to anger and frustration was a sure way to die. Without knowing the scale of the threat, he had to remain calm and keep a cool head.

His hand, already outstretched to summon a weapon, hovered in the air for a couple of moments, and then relaxed.

Sunny sent one of his shadows forward, and soon saw human figures emerging from one of the passages, some of them limping, the others carrying stretchers with those of their brethren who were too heavily wounded to walk.

The Lost… they were the remaining guardians of the Night Temple. In front of them, a woman in a black tunic was walking, her red hair dirty and damp with sweat. There was a grim, dark expression on her face.

'So there are survivors, after all…'

There were a dozen or so warriors who could still fight, although they didn't seem to be in the best shape. Several were carrying lanterns and torches, the orange flames pushing the darkness reigning in the great hall back. They were still too far away to notice Sunny and Cassie, but he had no doubt that they would be discovered soon.

'What to do, what to do… wait, or hide?'

A moment later, the decision was made for him.

As Sunny watched, one of the Lost suddenly approached Master Welthe and whispered something to her, then pointed directly at the shadow that was observing them from the darkness.

'Crap…'

Sunny was more or less certain in his ability to contend with one of the Ascended knights, provided of course that Saint and the Serpent were on his side. With the dozen Lost supporting the opponent, though… it was a fight he would have preferred to avoid.

Especially considering that what he needed the most right now was information, which the survivors possessed.

Soon, a lone figure separated from the group of battered sentinels and headed their way with measured, steady steps. As soon as Sunny saw who it was, his face darkened.

Master Pierce… the man was as rugged and severe as he had been when they first met, his steely eyes cold and hard. The stubble on his cheeks had turned into a short beard and his lusterless scale mail was damaged in several places, but other than that, he looked exactly the same. It was as though the weeks of bloody horror had no effect on him at all.

Now, the odds were really not in Sunny's favor.

He was still sure of his ability to at least escape, though. If need be…

Master Pierce approached the central platform and stopped, studying Sunny and Cassie with a heavy gaze. Sunny cleared his throat and faked a shaky smile.

"S—sir Pierce! Thank the gods… we weren't sure that anyone was left alive!"

To his left, Cassie suddenly tensed. Knowing that she must have sensed something happening in the next few seconds, Sunny prepared for the worst. However, noting that the blind girl remained motionless, he didn't do anything rash, as well.

Master Pierce spoke, his voice dark and heavy:

"Well, well. What do we have here…"

In the next moment, a vast whirlwind of white sparks surrounded the platform. Sunny cursed inwardly, and watched as ten human figures appeared from the sparks, surrounding them. In an instant, the number of their potential enemies almost doubled.

These humans, though… he had to suppress a shiver. Their empty eyes, their empty shadows… no, they weren't humans at all. Instead, ten Echoes were staring at him with lifeless expressions, each radiating an eerie, deeply disturbing, and threatening aura.

Pierce stared at them coldly.

"I see that the two of you are still alive."

Sunny looked around, feverishly thinking about how to turn the situation around.

"Oh… about that…"

Before he could say anything, he noticed that Cassie turned her head slightly and glanced somewhere behind him, a small frown appearing on her face. Just like that, he knew that someone was there.

…Which was strange, considering that Sunny was always aware of what was behind his back thanks to the shadows, and couldn't see or sense anything right now.

The blind girl was proven right, though, in the next moment, when something cold touched his neck and a vaguely familiar raspy voice spoke into his ear:

"Don't move."

Sunny froze.

'That voice… the female sentinel that was guarding the gates on the day we arrived? Why can't I see her, or sense her shadow?'

The answer was rather obvious… the woman must have been able to don some form of invisibility thanks to her Aspect.

That was one nasty Ability…

He pretended to tremble.

"Yes, yes! I am not moving!"

For a couple of moments, no one spoke. Then, Cassie turned her face toward the fearsome Master and said:

"Sir Pierce… I would appreciate it if you could give us shelter and explain what is happening. We barely escaped the cage you put us in alive, and being met with such hostility is not how we imagined finding fellow humans again."

He stared at her for a bit, then grinned.

"Give you shelter? That is a good joke. Give me one reason to not kill you both, instead."

Cassie frowned, but did not show any fear. Instead, she remained silent for a few seconds, and then said in a calm and even voice:

"...You can try. You will certainly succeed. But not without paying a cost. Awakened Sunless and I might not be Ascended, but we did not receive our designations for nothing. How many of your men and Echoes will we take to hell with us?"

She paused for a moment, and then added:

"...How many can you spare?"

Master Pierce opened his mouth, wishing to say something, but was cut off by Welthe, who had approached from behind. The second Ascended spoke in a tired voice:

"Enough. We can't spare anyone, or anything. I know this and you do too, Pierce. These two are strong… they will be of use. We will take them with us."

He grimaced, then spat:

"What if that thing is hiding in one of them?"

Lady Welthe glanced at Sunny and Cassie and shook her head:

"They have been locked in the lesser cell for weeks… between all of us, these two are the least likely to have been taken. Besides, we have just destroyed his previous vessel. There are no mirrors in the great hall, so…"

She sighed heavily, then addressed Cassie:

"Come. It is… not safe here. We must return to the inner sanctum as fast as possible."

Pierce gritted his teeth, then snarled and dismissed the Echoes.

At the same time, Sunny felt the cold blade move away from his neck. In the next moment, the familiar sentinel appeared from the thin air beside him, holding a sharp dagger in her hand.

She smiled and winked at him.

"...Lucky you. Well, maybe next time."

With that, the woman headed toward the group of the Lost and beckoned for them to follow.

Sunny briefly glanced at Cassie, sighed, and started walking.

He wasn't too happy about how things had turned out, and knew that their conflict with the forces of Valor was not over. But for now, at least, there seemed to be a shaky truce between them.

Which gave him an opportunity to get some answers…

Chapter-576: Inner Sanctum

The Lost entered the inner sanctum of the Night Temple — its very heart — and bolted the heavy doors behind them. As soon as they did, a field of glowing runes flashed for a moment on the dark wooden surface, and then disappeared without a trace.

Sunny glanced at the door with a frown, but didn't say anything.

Cassie had never been to this part of the Citadel, so neither of them had any information about what was inside. The area was not too large, but right below them was the main bell tower of the cathedral, which was taller and wider than the other six belfries.

The two Masters led their people through somber corridors to a spacious hall that seemed to serve as their current stronghold. There were guards keeping watch in front of the entrance, crates with food and water, a fireplace keeping the cold at bay, and makeshift bedding for people to sleep on.

Just from looking at the number of cots, Sunny understood that not everyone had returned from their latest hunt... or whatever it was that the sentinels had tried to accomplish.

All in all, twenty-three Lost remained, some of them heavily wounded. With Pierce, Welthe, and the two of them, there were less than thirty humans left to oppose the mad prince. That meant that in several weeks, Mordret had eviscerated more than two-thirds of the temple's defenders.

Remembering how confident Master Welthe had been in their ability to contain the prisoner at the start of all this, Sunny couldn't help but shake his head.

...Mordret turned out to be more lethal and terrifying than even his jailers had expected.

The wounded were quickly tended to, and the Lost fell on their cots, dead tired. A few went through the familiar motions of maintaining the camp — cooking food, distributing water, and doing other miscellaneous tasks. Everything was performed swiftly and with trained precision, proving once more how experienced and professional these people were.

They were obviously fatigued, both mentally and physically, but not nearly as beaten and unsteady as Sunny had thought. Their spirits were not broken... perhaps because only those with the strongest wills had survived.

He also couldn't help but notice that there was not a single reflective surface in the whole of the inner sanctum. The Lost wore either armor made out of leather or dull steel that didn't give off reflections, and even made sure to store and drink water from opaque containers, not letting a single drop fall to the floor.

After a while, the familiar female sentinel approached them and said:

"Sir and Lady wish to see you."

Sunny and Cassie were led to a separate room, where Pierce and Welthe were waiting for them behind a wide round table. Both of their expressions were grim.

Welthe gestured to a couple of chairs and, after waiting for a few moments, said:

"The two of you will follow simple rules. From now on, you are under our command. You will follow any order either Sir Pierce or I give you. You will not use any Memory or item that can be used as a mirror inside the inner sanctum… or outside of it, if you wish to live. You will not conspire against your fellow soldiers or tell a single soul about what you have seen here in the Night Temple.

If you disagree, leave right now."

Sunny and Cassie glanced at each other, but remained seated.

Welthe nodded, then looked at Sunny.

"Awakened Sunless… please, describe how you came in possession of that piece of a broken mirror. This time, in detail."

Pierce suddenly leaned forward and growled:

"And don't even think about lying to us, boy! You won't like the result!"

Sunny pretended to look at him with a bit of fear.

'I couldn't lie even if I wanted to, you fool…'

He told the tale of how he had encountered the Mirror Beast on the Reckoning Island and almost lost his life to the strange creature.

Knowing that he had to give up at least some valuable information, as well as explain how he had managed to defeat such a dangerous abomination, he shared the detail about using the flaw of his own Aspect against the Reflection — while not mentioning what that Flaw was exactly, of course.

After, both Masters were silent for a while. Finally, Welthe spoke, her voice solemn:

"So one of his Reflections managed to escape, after all. To think that it had been so close all this time…"

Sunny hesitated, then cautiously asked:

"I am sorry… but what was this piece of mirror, exactly? If it was so dangerous, why… why was I even allowed to bring it inside?"

Pierce clenched his fists and stared at him with fury. Then, he uttered through gritted teeth:

"...The inspection was meant to prevent mundane mirrors from being brought into the Citadel. No one could have expected that there was one more fragment out there, somewhere. If we knew… you would have been killed as soon as you set foot on the Chained Isles. As for what that fragment was, it's not for you to know."

Sunny shivered slightly, realizing how big of a target he had drawn

on himself by picking up the inconspicuous piece of mirror. No wonder Saint Tyris had warned him to never speak of visiting the Reckoning Island to anyone…

While he was thinking that, Cassie finally spoke.

"With all due respect, Sir Pierce… we have the right to know. Or rather, we need to. How are we supposed to fight against the threat if we don't know what it is? What, exactly, have we unleashed? What kind of a creature is capable of causing so much death and destruction?"

The Master opened his mouth to spit a cold response, but Welthe spoke first, her voice calm:

"...She is right, Pierce. They need to know, if they are to be useful. "

She sighed, then looked away and remained silent for a while. Then, Welthe grimaced, rubbed her face, and said, her voice somber and grave:

"The creature that you have unleashed… that monster... is Mordret of Valor. The Prince of War…"

Chapter-577: Only You

After that statement, the room was silent for a while. Sunny frowned, thinking about what he had just heard.

He wasn't really surprised to learn that Mordret was a scion of the great clan Valor. He had already known that there was some connection there… he had also considered that one possible explanation for Mordret's strange insistence on calling himself a prince was a blood relation to one of the Sovereigns.

Now, it was more or less clear that Anvil of Valor… was the mysterious prince's father.

What made Sunny frown, however, was that Welthe called Mordret the Prince of War. Was that an indication that clan Valor had inherited the lineage of War God, just like the Immortal Flame clan inherited that of Sun God?

If so… what lineages did the other two Great Clans possess?

…And where did it leave him, who was supposed to become the inheritor of Shadow God, but ended up stuck with a forbidden lineage of an elusive daemon instead?

Meanwhile, Cassie spoke, her voice slightly surprised:

"...of Valor?"

Master Welthe sighed again, then nodded.

"Yes. Prince Mordret was… is the eldest son of Saint Anvil, one of the patriarchs of our great clan. As a young child, he was given as a hostage to a… powerful ally. To keep peace and ensure prosperity for all. No harm was meant to come to him. And it didn't… or so we thought.

Years later, the prince was returned to us as a valiant Awakened, to our joy and relief."

Pierce's face darkened, and he looked away. Welthe lingered for a few moments, and then continued:

"But our joy was shortlived. Soon, it became apparent that the boy had grown up to be… disturbed. He was cruel, uncaring, and had… certain impulses that couldn't be controlled. The more powerful he became, the less human he seemed. And he was powerful, incredibly so. More powerful than any Awakened was supposed to be."

She looked down, then grimaced.

"In the end, Prince Mordret left the clan and, breaking the command of the elders, sought out a Seed of Nightmare to become a Master. Knowing that he was too dangerous to be allowed to Ascend… or even to walk freely in the waking world… it was with a heavy heart that a decision was made to eliminate him. Monster or not, he was our responsibility, after all."

Sunny rubbed his temples. There was a lot of new information in what they were told… provided it was true, of course. Which he wasn't sure that it was.

Had Mordret really been given away as a "hostage"? Was he really disturbed and dangerous? Maybe he was, and maybe he wasn't… or had not been, at least. Whatever the case, Sunny had no doubt that it had no bearing on Anvil's decision to get rid of his firstborn son. The key phrases in all the noble-sounding words Welthe had spoken were "too powerful" and "couldn't be controlled".

Mordret had probably been forbidden from challenging the Second Nightmare for that very reason… that was why he had come to the Chained Isles alone, seeking a Seed that had not been discovered — and thus, couldn't be guarded — by the forces of the Sovereigns.

Which eventually led to his downfall.

One thing, however, didn't make a lot of sense…

Sunny glanced at the Masters, and then asked doubtfully:

"If that Mordret was so dangerous… why didn't you just kill him? Why go to all this trouble and imprison him, instead?"

After a short pause, it was Pierce who answered, his voice grim:

"...Do you think we haven't tried? His physical body was destroyed… his spirit body, too. But that still didn't kill him. No matter what we attempted, that thing simply refused to die. Many of my comrades did in the process, however. In the end, we could only bind him… and even that was only possible with the help of the Saints."

Sunny stared at the fearsome Master, dumbfounded.

'Both his physical and spirit body destroyed, and yet he still exists… how is that even possible?'

He opened his mouth, then closed it… then opened it again.

"...What is his Aspect, exactly?"

Pierce and Welthe glanced at each other. In the end, the woman spoke:

"It has to do with mirrors, reflections, and souls. Prince Mordret is able to travel through mirrors and control the reflections. His second Ability… his second Ability, though, is much more terrifying. If one looks at him through any form of a mirror, their soul will be devoured, and their body will become his. By taking a vessel, the prince inherits their Memories, Echoes… and even their Aspect.

But also their Flaw — similar to the being you have encountered on the Reckoning Island, which was one of his creations."

She fell silent for a few moments, and absentmindedly touched the amulet in the shape of an anvil hanging around her neck.

"...Pierce and I are immune to his powers. The rest of our soldiers, though, are not so fortunate. He had been taking one after another, using their bodies to kill the rest. The latest vessel of his was especially dangerous, since it possessed an Aspect that allowed him to create puppets out of… out of the dead bodies of our brothers and sisters.

We managed to destroy the vessel, but the prince himself got away… just like before. We weren't able to use the binding and imprison him again."

Sunny tilted his head a little.

…Now, finally, a lot of things had become clear. Why Mordret had been imprisoned, why the Night Temple was closed off to strangers, and why only the Echoes and the Lost were allowed to guard the prisoner — the former did not possess souls and couldn't be taken, while the latter could not return to the waking world even if the prince somehow escaped and took them as a vessel.

Back in the waking world, catching him would be all but impossible, so…

Suddenly, Sunny shivered.

Noticing his expression, Pierce grinned darkly.

"I see you finally understand. Yes… don't think that you can reason with that beast or make use of the fact that his hatred is aimed at clan Valor, and not you. Currently, there are only four people in this Citadel whose bodies can allow him to eventually return to the waking world. Welthe and I cannot be taken, and neither can Lady Cassia, due to her blindness. Which leaves…"

Master Pierce stared at him with his cold, dangerous eyes.

Sunny cursed.

"...only you."

Chapter-578: Perfect Vessel

'Well… that's just damn great!'

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. The worst part was that he couldn't even disagree with Pierce's reasoning… because his own conclusion was more or less the same.

Of course, Mordret was perfectly capable of making one of the Lost his vessel in hopes of traveling to the Sanctuary — or a more remote human Citadel, if need be — and stealing another body there. But why would he settle for a vastly inferior option when a perfect candidate was right there, his for the taking?

Maybe that was the reason why he had not tried to seek out Sunny in the previous weeks. Mordret might have wanted to leave him for last.

…Thanks to Cassie, Sunny had a general idea about the Aspects of both Welthe and Pierce. The fearsome Master seemed to possess powers that made him highly resistant, if not outright immune, to various forms of attacks, while his more friendly counterpart specialized in enhancing her combat prowess and debilitating the enemy.

Noting that only Welthe was wearing the strange anvil amulet, he made a guess that she was protected from Mordret's Ability by its enchantment, while Pierce was capable of countering the possession simply through the might of his Aspect.

Cassie could not be taken, too, due to her blindness. One had to look at the reflection to be possessed, which she was incapable of.

That left only Sunny…

But more than that, Mordret had secretly watched him for months, and knew perfectly well how powerful Sunny actually was, as well as

how he spoke, behaved, and carried himself. Who were his friends and who were his enemies. Mordret knew everything he needed to know to impersonate him perfectly, as well as how much would be gained by stealing his Aspect, Shadows, and Memories.

Truly… Sunny was an ideal vessel.

It was almost as though this role had been predetermined for him from the very start.

'Damnation…'

He hesitated for a bit, then glanced at Pierce and Welthe, this time not even having to fake worry.

"So, uh… what is the plan, then?"

The Masters lingered for a bit. Then, Welthe spoke, her voice dark and bitter:

"We won't try to venture outside and try to bind that monster again. At this point… at this point, we don't have enough numbers to trap him anymore. However, he also has no way of infiltrating the inner sanctum, and the vessel that made time his best ally is destroyed. So, we will just wait. In about a week, maybe even less, Saint Cormac will return.

Then, Prince Mordret will have to face a Transcendent's wrath."

She clearly was not happy about having to take a passive approach, since, in a sense, this was as good as admitting defeat. But this plan of action did, indeed, seem like the best way to go… at least on the surface.

All they had to do was barricade themselves inside the impregnable inner sanctum and wait for the cavalry to arrive. Surely, this much was within their ability.

Sunny forced out a smile.

"That is… a good plan."

Master Welthe nodded, then turned to Cassie:

"Lady Cassia… if your Aspect brings you a helpful vision, don't hesitate to inform me immediately. Now, please go and rest, you two. Eat your fill… we all need to keep up our strength."

Just like that, the conversation was over.

Sunny and Cassie stood up, bowed to the masters, then returned to the main hall. There, they endured the unfriendly gazes of the Lost, filled two bowls with tasty-looking porridge, took a couple of opaque jars of water, and found a pair of empty straw mattresses in a remote corner.

Sitting down, the two concentrated on the food, happy to finally eat something that was not synthpaste. The meat porridge wasn't much, but to them, it tasted heavenly.

…After a while, Cassie said quietly while pretending to chew:

"What do you think?"

Sunny swallowed a spoonful of porridge, took a sip of water, and answered as he continued to stare at the floor:

"They are lying, of course. There is no way that Mordret won't get into the inner sanctum, somehow. He is too damn devious for that. I know it, and they know it, too."

His shadow, meanwhile, watched the figure of the sentinel who could turn invisible, to make sure that she wasn't listening in on their conversation.

He kept a neutral expression as he ate some more, then added without looking at the blind girl:

"What is most likely to happen is that things are going to go south very soon. Welthe and Pierce will wait and observe for a bit, and then probably try to use us as bait to lay a trap for him."

Cassie remained silent for a few moments, then asked:

"How do you know?"

He smiled.

"...Because that's what I would have done."

After that, both continued to eat, preoccupied with their own thoughts. A few moments passed before Cassie spoke again, her voice a bit uncertain:

"So then what do we do?"

Sunny enjoyed the taste of the porridge, chewed it slowly, and then answered calmly:

"For now? Nothing. Let's wait and observe, too. Rest and eat, just like we were told to. Restore our strength. Then… then, we'll see."

They didn't speak after that, and, after finishing their food, allowed the exhaustion to overwhelm them. Laying side by side on the thin straw mattresses, Cassie and Sunny fell asleep. Only his watchful shadows remain alert, guarding their master through the night.

…When the two of them woke up, the air smelled of blood.

Only twenty-one of the twenty-three Lost were still alive.

The two sentinels who kept watch outside the hall had been brutally slaughtered, without anyone even noticing how and when. Their bodies were still warm, and their blood painted the floors, the walls, and even the ceiling crimson, turning the somber corridor into a ghastly painting.

In the center of the pool of blood, a single shard of mirror lay, as if mocking the surviving soldiers of the great clan Valor. Welthe growled and destroyed it before anyone could approach.

… It seemed that Mordret chose not to hide the fact that he had entered the inner sanctum.

Instead, he wanted everyone to know.

To see what he had done.

And wait, wondering…

Whom would he take next?

Chapter-579: First Victim

The Lost crowded near the entrance, staring at the grisly scene with grim expressions. Welthe was in the corridor. She was standing in the middle of the pool of blood, her fists clenched.

Sunny wasn't clear on who had discovered the bodies, since he only woke up due to the noise of everyone rushing to the door and the shine of the sparks of light as they summoned their weapons. He remained at the back of the crowd, using one of the shadows to study the corpses, and another to observe the surviving sentinels.

There was a thoughtful expression on his face.

'I wonder…'

Before he could finish the thought, Pierce appeared from behind the bend of the corridor, glanced at Welthe, shook his head briefly, and then growled at the Lost:

"What are you standing around for?! Clean up this mess and secure the perimeter! No one moves alone or in pairs, three people minimum! Be ready, the bastard might return at any minute!"

The soldiers glanced at each other, seeds of fear blooming in the depths of their eyes. Then, they silently got to work, following the Master's command.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, then returned to Cassie and sat down on his mattress.

The blind girl asked quietly:

"Who died? And how?"

He rubbed his face tiredly.

"The guards. One was the guy who had noticed my shadow back in the great hall. The other, I didn't know him. As to how… pretty much the same as everyone else. Butchered and cut to pieces…"

She thought for a bit, then frowned.

"And no one heard a thing?"

Sunny sighed.

"He must have done it really fast. Or his new vessel possesses an Aspect that can dampen sounds."

He remained silent for a bit, then said somberly:

"Anyway, you should prepare."

Cassie tilted her head.

"Prepare for what? Another attack?"

Sunny didn't answer immediately, looking at the Lost. Everyone seemed busy and focused, moving with trained precision and purpose. However, there was a hint of uncertainty on their pale faces. The sentinels tried to hide it, but to no avail.

He looked down.

"No. Right now, everyone only thinks that Mordret somehow broke through the seals and got into the inner sanctum. However, once they have time to think, they'll realize that there's another possibility."

The blind girl paled. Sunny smiled darkly and added:

"...That he has been with them this whole time, hiding in one of the two strangers who had miraculously escaped an enchanted cell and insisted on being taken to this shelter. You or me."

Cassie gritted her teeth.

"There's no reasonable way to pin these murders on us."

He chuckled.

"What does reason have to do with any of this? Reason is always the first victim when fear arrives."

With that, he fell silent and, after a few seconds, rose to go and get them some breakfast.

As Sunny walked toward the part of the hall that had been converted into a makeshift kitchen, many gazes followed him. Just as he had expected, they were slowly turning dark and dangerous, full of hostility, fear, and suspicion.

Pretending to be appropriately frightened, too, he put some porridge in the bowls.

'...Interesting.'

Mordret… might not have been as crazed as Sunny had thought before.

From the start of it, something about how the Prince of Nothing behaved had not sat right with him. Mordret had shown himself to be extremely cunning and meticulous, crafting such a masterful trap that even Sunny, who was an ingenious deceiver as well, fell into it without suspecting a thing.

The sadistic way in which dozens of the Lost had been killed and the morbid displays of demented butchery that the prince had left in the halls of the Night Temple, however, were utterly impractical and did not fit into this image of a cold and calculating strategist at all.

Now that Mordret had decided to reveal his presence in the inner sanctum and sacrifice the invaluable advantage of surprise in exchange for only two lives, Sunny became convinced that there was a method to this madness.

…And as the surviving Lost followed him with heavy gazes, dark expressions contorting their faces, he was pretty sure that he understood its purpose.

Mordret wanted them to be suspicious of each other, he wanted them to be tense and scared. He wanted their spirits to break.

Why? To make their souls weak and their willpower shaken, of course. Which suggested that his ability to devour souls was not absolute, and required the victim to be… what? To be defeated? To surrender? Or simply to be weaker than his?

'...What a bastard.'

Sunny returned to Cassie and gave her a bowl of porridge, then frowned.

Honestly, he wasn't sure who was scarier… an unhinged lunatic that enjoyed torturing his victims before murdering them in horrific ways, or a cold-blooded killer that uncaringly did the same simply because it suited his practical goals.

Either way, the result would be the same. The Lost were shaken, but not nearly close to breaking down. Which meant that Mordret was not going to stop… no, he was only getting started sowing terror into the souls.

The question was… how was Sunny supposed to stop him?

He ate his porridge, then glanced at Pierce and Welthe, who were speaking quietly near the doors.

…And should he?

***

Soon, Master Pierce summoned the ten Echoes. Even though maintaining them at all times cost a considerable amount of essence, it was decided that the disturbing things would remain among the Lost from now on.

Several were sent to explore the inner sanctum and try to find signs of the attacker, or at least learn how he had managed to get inside. The rest assumed guarding positions outside the hall, making the remaining sentinels feel both relieved and tense.

Not even these experienced warriors felt comfortable in the presence of human Echoes.

The security measures were enhanced, as well. No one was allowed to remain alone, and if there was a need to leave the common area, only groups of three could do so. Sunny and Cassie had to recruit the help of the female sentinel — the one who had the ability to turn invisible — just to visit the bathroom.

And yet, none of these measures helped protect the stronghold.

Come the next morning, two more Lost were dead. This time, they were killed inside the hall itself, not even in the corridor outside.

After that, things turned really ugly for Sunny.

Chapter-580: Presumption of Guilt

Two days had passed after the battle with Mordret's previous vessel and the army of corpse puppets he had created with its help. Those of the wounded who had received light injuries were already back on their feet, but three of the sentinels were still in bad shape.

Their comrades were doing everything in their power to treat their wounds, but with every healer in the Citadel already dead, there was little that could be done to hasten the recovery. One of the corners of the hall was converted into an infirmary, where the three heavily injured sentinels rested and received care.

…In the morning, a piercing scream suddenly echoed between the black stone walls. Those who were sleeping jumped up, grabbing the weapons that they had kept summoned to be ready for an attack. Those who remained awake were already moving, rushing toward the source of the scream — the makeshift infirmary.

Sunny simply sat up on his mattress, a tense expression on his face.

There were three cots for the wounded, standing in a row along the wall. It was the Lost who occupied the middle one that was screaming, his face contorted by an expression of sheer terror.

The other two were dead.

Their throats were sliced open, blood streaming to the floor. Both were killed in their sleep, without alerting anyone around… as far away from the entrance to the hall as it was possible, right in the middle of the sentinels' camp.

The third one clearly could have been murdered as well, and had been left alive on purpose, as if to mock the Lost.

It was as though Mordret was telling them that no one was safe, and that he was perfectly capable of taking each of them whenever he pleased.

"W—what?!"

"How did he get inside?!"

"He might still be here!"

The Lost were on the verge of panicking, but in the end, their training and skill prevailed. Instead of descending into chaos, the situation inside the hall immediately turned into a coordinated action. Even before Peirce and Welthe arrived, the sentinels were already moving to stand in a defensive formation, weapons drawn and ready for battle.

The two Masters appeared mere seconds after the scream. They quickly assessed the situation and joined their soldiers, half of the Echoes moving closer, half barring the doors.

For a few moments, there was a tense silence in the stronghold of the Valor forces. The surviving sentinels waited tensely by the infirmary, while five empty-eyed Echoes blocked the exit.

There was no one else in the hall… except for Sunny and Cassie, who had not moved from the start of it all.

Slowly, all of the Lost focused on the two of them. Their gazes were dark, cold, and full of danger.

Sunny's face twitched.

'Crap…'

Was Mordret aware of how these actions would affect the two of them? Was he trying to force them out into the open on purpose, making it impossible to stay with the sentinels?

What was his damn plan, really? What was his endgame? How was he planning to deal with Saint Cormac in a few days, and what role was everyone else supposed to play before that?

He opened his mouth, wishing to say something to defuse the situation, but one of the Lost was faster:

"It's them! It must be one of them!"

As soon as this first accusation was made, the floodgates were open. A moment later, Sunny and Cassie were assaulted by a litany of cries, all blaming them for the deaths of the two wounded sentinels.

Sunny stared at the crowd of Lost, feeling his heart grow cold. A single person could be reasoned with… but what he saw right now was not a group of people, but a massive creature with many heads, many shouting mouths, and many eyes that burned with fury, fear… and dark, murderous intent.

A frightened crowd did not know reason, it only knew fear, and the desire to either escape or destroy its source.

...Ironically, there were very few things more frightening than a senseless crowd.

The Lost were much more resilient and prepared than most people, but even battle-hardened warriors like them had a limit. After weeks of being hunted, slaughtered, and brutalized by the elusive and terrifying fiend, they seemed to have finally reached it.

Of course, there was no logic behind the accusations. Neither Sunny nor Cassie possessed the means to commit the murder unnoticed — simply for the fact that they had been watched this entire time, since no one really trusted them, to begin with.

But his attempt to explain this was drowned by the chorus of angry shouts.

Sunny noticed Pierce and Welthe exchanging a quick look, their faces calm, but somber. At least these two had managed to keep a cool head… but would that change anything?

His heartbeat slowed.

Sunny mentally took in the entirety of the hall — the Echoes standing guard near the doors, the two Masters, the formation of the Lost, the

dead sentinels laying on the blood-soaked cots…

Would he be able to fight his way out of this place? And what would happen next? The forces of Valor would surely pursue him and Cassie…

It was at this moment that a sudden realization hit him.

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then slowly rose to his feet. His hand hovered in the air, as if ready to summon a weapon.

That action was enough to cause a chain effect among the Lost.

One of them suddenly lunged forward, throwing a javelin at Sunny. Another drew his bow, an arrow already knocked on the string…

Nothing came of it, however.

Almost instantly, Pierce growled, his voice easily suppressing the shouts:

"Stop, you wretched bastards! Who ordered you to attack?! Anyone who moves, I'll kill myself!"

At the same time, Welthe turned into a blur and appeared in front of Sunny, catching the javelin before it could get anywhere near him. She looked at the weapon with a scowl, then threw it on the floor.

The Echoes standing in front of the sentinel formation suddenly turned, facing the Lost. Their empty eyes stared at the frightened warriors, no emotion in them.

…Just like that, the two Masters tamed the wild beast of the human crowd. No matter how far gone the sentinels were, there were still remnants of discipline etched deep into their bones.

More than that, the easiest way to defeat fear was with a different, much greater fear.

Under the unnerving gaze of the Echoes, the accusing shouts abruptly stopped. The Lost hesitated, then hesitantly lowered their weapons.

However, their burning gazes were still focused on Sunny and Cassie, their thirst for violence temporarily leashed, but not quenched.

Welthe lingered for a moment, then looked at them over her shoulder.

"...You better come with me. It is… not safe for the two of you to remain with the others. Don't worry, though. We'll keep you safe."

Sunny pretended to shiver, glanced at the crowd of the Lost, and nodded.

"Sure. Yeah… no problem."

Inwardly, though, he was grinning.

'Keep us safe... what a bunch of crap…'

Sunny and Cassie were led deeper into the inner sanctum. They passed the room with the round table where the two Masters had first interrogated them, then the personal quarters of the Ascended knights, and were finally led to a small room with a single door.

Welthe let them inside and remained at the threshold.

She was quiet for a few moments, and then said:

"Wait for a bit. I will bring you food and water later. This will be your lodgings from now on, so get comfortable."

With that, she closed the door and left.

Sunny smiled darkly.

…He didn't hear the click of the lock, but the implication was clear.

The small room was much more comfortable than the iron cage, but it served the same purpose.

Once again, they were in a prison cell.

...However, Sunny knew that this time, they won't be staying in it long.

Chapter-581: Bell Tower

Several days passed with nothing disastrous happening. Sunny and Cassie spent them inside the small room, eating the food Welthe or one of the Echoes brought them and restoring their strength. Even though they were constantly watched, both remained calm and somewhat relaxed.

Outside, things weren't as peaceful.

Of course, Mordret had not killed again… doing so would have only compromised his efforts to frame Sunny for the murders. However, the air was so full of tension that one could almost cut it with a knife. With every day of nothing happening, the already frayed nerves of the Lost drew tauter and tauter.

Fear, unease, and anxious anticipation built and built, mixing under the pressure of uncertainty into dark, viscous, and volatile dread.

Sometimes, doing nothing produced the best result.

...Mordret knew when to push and when to pull too well.

With nothing to do but wait for an inevitable attack and nowhere to release the tension, the Lost spent a lot of time staring at the closed doors that led to the quarters where Sunny and Cassie were kept, their face growing darker with each day.

Something had to give… at this point, even Pierce and Welthe didn't seem confident in their ability to keep these soldiers under control and battle-ready. The two Masters spent the time making their own plans. Sunny didn't know what these plans were, since he didn't dare to send one of his shadows to spy on the formidable knights of Valor.

…He had a pretty good guess, though.

On one of these days, he noticed that the Lost seemed especially restless. Pierce and Welthe were behaving a bit strangely, as well.

Sunny frowned, then walked to the door, picked up a tray of food that had been delivered by an Echo a few hours earlier, then brought it over and handed one of the bowls to Cassie.

"Eat well today."

The blind girl gave him a short nod. To an outsider, this exchange would not have looked like anything, but the two of them knew each other very well… no matter how complicated this relationship was.

Sunny had let Cassie know everything he needed to convey, and she had signaled that his message was received.

Not saying anything else, they concentrated on the food.

Although the Night Temple was sealed and cut off from the outside world, it seemed as though the temperature inside had dropped by a lot in the last few days. The cathedral was chilly before, but now, the cold felt intrusive and everpresent.

Beyond the black walls of the Citadel, November was in full swing. It was at least one week past the date when Sunny and Cassie were supposed to rendezvous with the rest of the cohort on the Shipwreck island, in case Valor denied them access to the Gateway.

Sunny wondered how Effie and Kai were doing right now. Were they worried, or waiting patiently, not knowing that everything had gone horribly wrong?

There was no way to know.

He sighed and looked at Cassie. The blind girl was sitting silently, staring into nothingness. They were close enough for him to see the reflection of his pale face in her beautiful blue eyes.

Sunny smirked.

'Huh… not bad.'

He had looked terrible after crawling out of the iron cage, but by now, his appearance was more or less back to normal. He felt much better, too.

Whatever fate had in store for him, he was ready.

…A few hours later, the door of their small room opened, and Welthe appeared outside. The Master looked at them somberly and said in an even voice:

"Lady Cassia, Awakened Sunless. The situation has changed a bit. It is… not safe for the two of you to remain here anymore. Come. We have to move you to a different location."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, then asked cautiously:

"Is, uh… is everything alright?"

She lingered, then answered succinctly:

"...It will be."

'Wow. Not ominous at all.'

Without much choice, Sunny and Cassie stood up and followed the red-haired Master. They were led into the main hall of the fortified encampment and through it, feeling the Lost follow them with dark gazes.

At some point, several Echoes appeared to their right and left, as if to protect them should anything happen.

…Or to prevent them from escaping, depending on how one was inclined to look at it.

The small procession left the stronghold of the Valor forces and entered the corridors of the inner sanctum. They walked through the maze of them and entered a spiral staircase.

Sunny looked around tentatively, then asked:

"Where are we going?"

Welthe gestured down.

"The bell tower."

She didn't add anything else, as if her answer had explained everything. Sunny scowled, but didn't press the issue.

What was the point?

The staircase was long and winding, circling the entire tower many times. With each revolution, the spiral became narrower. From time to time, they saw closed doors to their left, but never to their right.

Finally, after a while, they reached the end of the stairs and waited as Welthe opened a heavy gate blocking the path forward.

Sunny and Cassie found themselves at the very bottom of the main bell tower of the Night Temple. Somewhere below them, a massive bell was swaying gently on an ancient iron chain. The tip of the seventh belfry was narrow, encompassing only a circular corridor and one central chamber. Currently, they were looking at its door.

The door was slightly opened.

Welthe stopped, then looked at Sunny and gestured forward.

"Come inside."

Sunny threw a glance at her, then at the Echoes surrounding him. He hesitated for a few moments, then sighed, swung the door open, and stepped into the chamber.

He found himself in a room built of cold stone. It was dark and full of deafening silence, arranged in the shape of a heptagon. Its seven corners were drowning in shadows, and at each of its seven walls, a large mirror frame stood.

However, the frames were empty. The mirrors they had once housed were long shattered and gone.

Sunny stared at them for a moment.

'Well… at least it's now clear where those thousands of mirror shards came from.'

That discrepancy had been tormenting him for a while. In a prison where no mirrors were allowed, where had Mordret found all those shards? Where had the piles of broken mirrors that Cassie saw in her vision appeared from? Now, he had an answer.

Satisfied, Sunny lowered his gaze and looked at the figures waiting for him inside the dark chamber.

Pierce was standing in its center, surrounded by the rest of the Echoes. His eyes were cold and heavy.

The fearsome master grimaced, then said, his voice low and threatening:

"Whatever you think of doing… I would advise against it."

At the same time, the door of the chamber closed with a deafening bang. The Echoes that had escorted them here were already inside, behind Sunny. Welthe was there, too.

She was holding a blade to Cassie's throat.

Her expression was dark and calm.

Sunny lingered for a couple of seconds, then slowly raised his hands with his palms open.

'Damn. How very unexpected... what a surprise...'

Chapter-582: For the Greater Good

Sunny froze, trying not to move a muscle. His face grew pale and solemn.

"W—what is going on? Master Welthe?"

The woman stared at his back, the blade of a slender saber pressed against Cassie's throat. She remained silent, as though unwilling to answer. However, Pierce spoke in her stead, a dark grin appearing on his lips:

"Don't worry… we'll tell you shortly."

With that, he commanded two Echoes to step forward. One was holding a large wooden box, its surface engraved with a complicated weave of a beautiful, but disorienting pattern. The other was holding a folded piece of black cloth.

Pierce carefully took the box, then placed it on the floor in front of him and closed his eyes for a moment. A loud click resounded from inside, and its lid rose by a few millimeters. He didn't touch it, though.

Instead, the fearsome Master sighed and took the folded cloth.

Sunny stared at the wooden box with a bit of apprehension.

"What is that thing?"

Welthe finally spoke, her voice cold and even:

"It is a mirror trap. A very special artifact created by the elders of our great clan. With its help, we can capture and bind the prince."

He blinked a couple of times, then forced out a weak smile.

"Well, that is… good? Right?"

Pierce snarled.

"Indeed… the problem is, the ritual requires some time to be performed. And that monster has proved to be too devious to be held back long enough for it to work. Every time we cornered him, he simply destroyed the vessel and slipped away. Because we were always a step behind, and he was the one in control of the battlefield."

The Master smiled.

"Well… that is about to change."

Sunny frowned.

Behind him, Cassie suddenly spoke:

"You… you want to lure him into a trap? By using us as bait?"

Welthe shook her head.

"Not you, Song of the Fallen. Just your companion. He is the one Prince Mordret wants, after all."

The other knight chuckled.

"He is the one who caused all this… isn't it only fair that he would be the one to end it?"

Pierce took a step forward and looked down at Sunny.

"I don't know why the bastard chose you as the final vessel, but from his actions, it is obvious that he is fixated on taking your body above all others. Why else would he have gone to such lengths to frame and excommunicate you? Going as far as to risk sneaking into our camp… the mad prince is ill and unhinged. If we present an opportunity to possess you, he won't be able to resist."

The Master scowled furiously.

"...And this time, we will be the ones in control. He won't escape us again. So… you wouldn't mind making a sacrifice for the greater good, would you, Awakened Sunless?"

Sunny shivered and took an involuntary step back. However, there was nowhere for him to go — Welthe and five Echoes were behind him, blocking the path of escape.

"W—what if I do mind?"

Pierce smiled.

"Then Lady Cassia will tragically lose her life at the hands of the escaped murderer… while heroically assisting the great clan Valor and saving lives, of course. And you will do as I say, anyway, only after a few additional… and very, very unpleasant… steps."

Cassie gritted her teeth, then shouted:

"Sunny! Don't do it!"

In the next moment, Welthe moved her saber, making the blind girl fall silent. A drop of blood rolled down her neck.

"Quiet…"

Sunny froze, as if not knowing what to do. His eyes darted around the chamber, as if searching for something to save him. But there was nothing he could use — only the two Masters and the ten Echoes, all ready to pounce at him if he were to try something.

"I… I…"

He trembled, hesitated, and then suddenly hung his head, as if defeated.

"...I'll do it. Just don't… don't hurt her. Please!"

'That wasn't too much… right?'

Cassie struggled in Welthe's grip.

"Sunny! No!"

He looked back, a solemn expression on his face. When he spoke, his voice sounded stifled and frightened, but also certain and full of resolve.

…Almost heroic.

"It's… it's alright. Don't be sad, Cassie. At least this way… this way, one of us will survive."

With that, Sunny faced Pierce and shivered.

"What… what do I need to do?"

The fearsome Master smirked, then handed him the folded piece of cloth.

"Good choice. Get down on your knees, first."

Sunny took the cloth and kneeled in front of the wooden box. Slowly, Welthe moved to stand side by side with Pierce, and the Echoes dispersed, hovering near the walls as they surrounded him.

He closed his eyes.

"...Now what?"

Welthe spoke, still holding Cassie with an iron grip. Pierce, meanwhile, bent down and put one hand on the lid of the box.

"Open your eyes. Unfold the cloth, then look at the item inside. Don't think of playing any tricks…"

She moved her saber, making Cassie whimper.

Sunny flinched, but remained on his knees. Gritting his teeth, he glanced at the blind girl, then lowered his head and slowly unfolded the cloth.

Inside, laying on the black fabric, was a single piece of a broken

mirror.

Sunny stared at it, and saw his pale reflection staring back.

The Masters tensed.

…And then, nothing happened.

Well, of course it didn't.

If Sunny had thought otherwise, he would have never allowed himself to end up in this situation.

In fact, he was pretty sure that he knew what Mordret was planning, and why. For that reason, he believed that staring into a mirror was perfectly safe for him, at least right now.

That's why he and Cassie had acted out this little performance, pretending to be frightened and clueless, or at least resigned to their fate. Sunny was actually pretty proud of himself. It seemed that his acting ability had really improved. That last line, especially… such intensity…

Cassie had done surprisingly well, too.

Pierce and Welthe stared at him, waiting for a sign that Mordret took the bait. However, after a few seconds of nothing happening, slight confusion appeared in their eyes, and then a hint of doubt.

…And then, fear.

Welthe was the first one to understand.

Her face paled, and she suddenly looked up, as if hoping to pierce countless layers of stone with her gaze.

And see the fortified camp that they had left behind.

Her lips trembled.

"No…"

Chapter-583: Web of Lies

It had taken Sunny a lot of time to understand what Mordret was doing, and why. But in the end, he had succeeded, and thus managed to predict what the elusive prince was going to do… or at least do it with a sufficient degree of certainty to stake his life on it in this desperate situation.

Just like everybody else, Sunny had been fooled at first. The initial revelation he had received had to do with the brutal murder of the two guards… it was then that he realized that Mordret was not as insane and perverse as everyone seemed to think.

Mordret's grotesque brutality was not the result of an irresistible, unhinged and sadistic compulsion. Instead, it was a cold and calculated strategy that the prince had employed to diminish his enemies, break their spirit, and make their souls susceptible to his attacks. He had weaponized terror itself, and made good use of it.

After all, people were most scared of that which was unknown. And what was more unknowable than the mind of a deranged, murderous madman?

After Sunny realized that there was such a possibility, the next step was both simple and hard to take. He had to take a good look at himself and admit that he himself had fallen victim to this tactic.

Mordret had gotten under his skin. Sunny was more resilient to deceit and manipulation than most, but he was also more vulnerable to the schemes of the Prince of Nothing. Their enmity was personal, and as such, involved powerful and destructive emotions. Humiliation, resentment… the sense of betrayal. Such emotions were the enemy of clarity.

Sunny had allowed his mind to be clouded by them, and through them, by fear.

So, he had to separate his emotions from his perception of the situation, knowing that some of them were a dire obstacle, and some were engineered by Mordret in order to obfuscate the truth.

Once he did, it was as though a veil had fallen from his eyes. Without it, several things became apparent.

The first one was that Mordret was not as terrifying as he wanted everyone to think. Sure, he was astonishingly powerful for an Awakened, and equally as lethal… enough so for Sunny to suspect that the prince possessed a divine Aspect.

If he and Nephis could, why not Mordret?

He didn't know how many soul cores Mordret possessed, but if his Aspect was indeed similar to theirs… there had been much more time for the former heir of Valor to accumulate soul fragments and grow stronger. This could also explain why his power level was so anomalous.

In any case, it didn't matter. Regardless of how powerful Mordret was, he was clearly not powerful enough to obliterate his jailers completely — otherwise, they would have been already dead. In fact, Sunny suspected that the Prince of Nothing was in the exact same situation as he himself was.

Sunny could take on one of the Masters, maybe even both of them with Cassie's help and a lot of luck. He also stood a chance in the battle against the surviving Lost.

But he couldn't fight them all together… and neither could Mordret.

It was not an accident that the guards had been killed in the usual brutal and ghastly fashion, but the wounded sentinels simply had their throats cut. The murderous prince had not abandoned his barbarous ways on a whim… he simply wasn't capable enough to do more unnoticed. Mordret was not all-powerful.

Just very, very good…

The second realization came thanks to the first one, after the two wounded sentinels had been killed and the crowd of their comrades

was hungry for Sunny's blood. Back then, he briefly considered running away, despite the fact that Pierce and Welthe would certainly pursue…

And this was it. At that moment, he understood Mordret's true goal. It was not to single out Sunny, separate him from the Lost, and possess his body… no, what the prince wanted was to separate the Lost from each other with Sunny's unwilling help. So that he could kill them, divided.

Which didn't mean that he had no plans for Sunny's body. Only that he wasn't aiming for it yet.

After Sunny understood Mordret's immediate goal, one last thing became apparent.

...It was that the murderer was indeed already among them.

Only he wasn't hiding inside Sunny, as the Lost suspected. Instead, he was hiding inside one of them.

This mystery tormented Sunny for a while. How could this be? After all, Pierce and Welthe weren't fools. They had a reason to be confident in their soldiers… and that reason was that none of the sentinels had interacted with a mirror or any sort of a reflection after Mordret's last vessel had been destroyed. Everyone was careful, and watchful of their comrades to keep them safe, too.

How could he have possessed one of them, then?

The answer was both simple and frightening. Sunny understood it after thinking about the sentinel who had brought food and water to their cage, then lost his mind and tore out his own eyes.

…The eyes.

The eyes were the mirror of the soul, after all.

Locked in a small room with Cassie, Sunny couldn't help but notice his own reflection in her beautiful eyes. Seeing his own face staring at back him from their depths, he shuddered…

Mordret didn't need a mirror to enter someone's soul. Every human in the Night Temple was a walking mirror — they just didn't know it. Not by chance, but by design. The banished prince had purposefully kept this facet of his power hidden, only using the mirrors and mundane reflections to take vessels, thus creating a false impression that this was the only way he could achieve it.

He was a devious monster, indeed.

Sunny kept this dreadful guess to himself and tried to deduce who among the Lost was the real murderer. He considered both Pierce and Welthe, then the only wounded sentinel to survive — using him as a vessel was just insidious enough for a fiend like Mordret.

But then, he entertained the idea that Mordret had not chosen his victims randomly. He had the ability to kill people inside the stronghold, to a much more terrifying effect… so why target the guards first?

One of the murdered guards had been a familiar face… the Lost who had an Aspect that allowed him to see the unseen, like Sunny's shadow hiding in the darkness.

Or peer through the veil of invisibility that the female sentinel who had almost cut Sunny's throat, invited him to see Welthe and Pierce, and even escorted him and Cassie to the bathroom could create.

Yes… Sunny was almost sure that Mordret was hiding in her body. This was how he had been able to kill the two guards, and later the two wounded, without being seen or heard. The answer was so obvious… the simplest solution was most often the correct one, after all.

And so, Sunny had predicted what was going to happen.

Mordret had pushed Pierce and Welthe into action. With their forces dwindling by the day and no definitive information on when Saint Cormac would arrive, the Masters could not simply wait. He lured them into leaving the stronghold to take Sunny away, thinking that they were luring Mordret into a trap instead.

And while they were gone…

The surviving Lost had no one to protect them from the monster hiding in their ranks.

…Welthe suddenly looked up, her face growing pale. Her lips trembled.

"No…"

Sunny lowered his head and suppressed a dark smile.

At that moment, the Masters finally understood what he had known for a while.

But it was too late.

Utterly and irrevocably late…

Chapter-584: A Dark Ocean

Welthe froze… but only for a moment. Then, she threw Cassie aside and dashed toward the door, disappearing in a blur. Sunny was pushed away, rolling on the floor and almost crashing against one of the empty mirror frames. By the time he regained his balance, she was already gone.

Pierce growled, then threw a murderous look at him and screamed:

"Kill them!"

With that, he dashed out of the chamber, too, dismissing most of the Echoes to take them with him.

…The fools still hoped that they could save their men.

Or avenge them, at least.

Sunny also couldn't really be mad at Pierce for ordering their death… he would have done the same. Now that their plan to bind Mordret had failed, the next best option was to make sure that there were no more vessels for him to possess. The sentinels were already as good as dead. That left only Sunny…

However, Sunny was not one to let go of the grudge.

'Curse you, you bastard…'

There were only two Echoes remaining in the mirror chamber. One was moving toward Cassie, already thrusting its sword forward. The other was towering over Sunny, its heavy battle axe raised.

Sunny glared at the Echo, not amused.

In the next moment, a stygian serpent appeared from the shadows behind the creature, wrapping its long and powerful body around the

macabre effigy. Then, its head shot forward, the maw opening to a terrible width. Sharp fangs closed on both sides of the Echoe's face, easily piercing through the skull and crushing it with a grisly crunch.

At the same time, Cassie rose to one knee and deflected her enemy's sword with a long dagger. A slender rapier flashed from behind her, piercing the creature's neck and emerging from its other side in a shower of blood.

Both Echoes fell to the floor, disintegrating into a rain of sparks. From start to finish, they had not made a sound.

Sunny rushed to Cassie and bent down, trying to ascertain the severity of her wound. His voice sounded tense and worried:

"Are you okay?"

There was blood flowing down her delicate neck, but the cut seemed shallow and not at all dangerous. A sense of profound relief spread through his chest.

The blind girl nodded.

"I'm fine! Go! There won't be another opportunity!"

He hesitated for a moment, then rose without saying a word, and stepped into the shadows.

Cassie was right. There would not be another chance… they were faced with two equal threats — one was the pair of Ascended knights, and the other was the cursed hellspawn, Mordret himself.

Sunny had to make sure that all three died today.

Well… two of them. He didn't know how to destroy the mirror fiend, so leaving Mordret without a vessel was going to have to suffice.

Previously, Sunny had left one of his shadows at the precipice of the stairway, and then commanded it to hide. Now, he appeared out of it, turning into a shadow himself — just in time to see Welthe and Pierce shoot past him.

'...Fast.'

Most of the Night Temple was submerged in darkness now that no one was alive to keep the lanterns aflame. Rushing through it, he followed the Masters, and reached the doors of the last stronghold of the Valor forces almost at the same instant as them.

Welthe simply crashed through the door, pulverizing it into a cloud of splinters.

What met them inside…

Was a bloodbath.

***

The encampment of the Lost was unrecognizable. Before, it had been clean and orderly, somewhat somber, but looking like a well-inhabited space.

Now, all Sunny could see was blood.

The floor was slick with blood, and so were the walls. Even the ceiling was painted red. All of the hall was one vast, morbid pool of the crimson liquid, with severed limbs and mangled bodies sprawled in it, some of them mutilated so thoroughly that it was almost impossible to recognize them as former humans.

The sight of it was revolting and horrid.

…And in the center of this vile slaughterhouse, a lone figure was sitting cross-legged, a carefree smile on her lips.

The beautiful female sentinel looked different, too.

Her appearance was the same, but everything else about her — her bearing, her gaze, her presence — had changed. It was relaxed and friendly, almost polite. She looked… exactly how Mordret had sounded, back when he and Sunny spoke in the lightless abyss of the Sky Below.

The dissonance between her pleasant demeanor and the gruesome

bloodbath surrounding her was ghastly, bizarre, and deeply disturbing.

When the two Masters appeared inside the hall, eight Echoes weaving themselves from sparks of light around them, Mordret's smile widened.

He absentmindedly threw a knife cut out of a single piece of a pristine white stone into the air, then caught it again, and somehow made it disappear without a trace.

"...Ah. Sir Pierce, Lady Welthe. You have finally made it."

Then, he shifted his gaze and looked directly at Sunny, who was hiding in the shadows near the door.

"...And you, Sunless! It is such a pleasure to finally meet you face to face. Well… I guess we've already met a few days ago. Still, what an occasion. I've waited for it for a long, long time."

He looked back to Welthe and Pierce, his smile remaining the same, but his eyes growing cold and frightening, as though there was a dark ocean of unfathomable depth hiding beneath their surface, full of harrowing terrors.

"...But not as long as I've waited to meet the two of you."

Pierce growled, taking a step forward:

"You bastard!"

Mordret threw his head back and laughed.

"What? Don't you like my handiwork? I've tried so hard, just to impress you!"

He grinned, then slowly rose to his feet, the friendly smile disappearing from his face. Instead, an expression of dark, cold, murderous wrath appeared on it.

"Six years… six long years you have kept me in that empty mausoleum. You and the rest of the great, noble, illustrious clan

Valor."

The female sentinel outstretched her hand, summoning a simple sword from the thin air.

"You destroyed my body, stole my birthright… you even destroyed my Reflections. Ah, but no matter. I had plenty of time to think of ways to repay your generosity. The things I have in store for you… oh, my! When I am done with clan Valor, the word itself will gain a new meaning. Even the gods will look up from their graves, and tremble."

Mordret smiled, then said evenly, not moving his gaze away from Pierce and Welthe.

"...What do you think, Sunless? You and I have no quarrel… well. Unless you are still angry about that little deception of mine. I can't really blame you... these two, however, will never let you leave this place alive. Shall we join forces, deal with them, and then escape together?

Ah, I could be lying, of course. Maybe I'll just use you again, then kill that little oracle of yours, and take your body. Who knows…"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then stepped out of the shadows, appearing between Mordret and the Masters.

Welthe glanced at him with a hint of concern. Pierce grimaced, then uttered through gritted teeth:

"Don't do anything stupid, boy. This thing isn't even a human… I don't know what was done to him, but he had not been a human for a long, long time. He will consume your soul and wear your body like a suit… and even then, it won't be of any use. Once Lord Cormac returns, even that which remains of you will be obliterated. It's not too late… join us, and together, we can stop this demon."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, then glanced at Mordret.

Finally, he sighed, took a few steps, and stopped beside the female sentinel. Saint and the Soul Serpent appeared from the shadows to his left and his right.

Together, the four of them — Sunny, Mordret, and the two Shadows — faced the two knights of Valor and the eight human Echoes.

Sunny smirked.

"I am somewhat of a demon myself, you know…"

Chapter-585: Clash

As the Cruel Sight started to manifest itself from swirling dark mist and the helmet of the Undying Chain was being summoned into existence, Sunny had a moment to evaluate their chances.

The result… wasn't too good. He didn't know how powerful exactly Mordret was, but the chances that he was considerably stronger than their enemies seemed to be slim enough to be considered non-existent. Otherwise, the banished prince would not have had to rely on his cunning so much.

From how they were positioned and the little details of everyone's gazes, Sunny knew that Welthe was aiming for Mordret, and vice versa. That meant that he was going to have to face Pierce, while Saint and the Serpent would be tasked with holding back the Echoes.

He wasn't too worried for Saint, who was an Ascended and excelled in defense and durability. The Serpent, however, would have to be really careful…

Sunny was most worried about himself, though. He was not going to underestimate Pierce… the man was not only a Master, but also an elite, a knight of the great clan Valor. He was as formidable as he was deadly.

His Aspect made Pierce resistant to all sorts of attacks, as well.

With this in mind, Sunny commanded two shadows to wrap themselves around his body, and reluctantly sent one to Saint. Ascended or not, fighting against eight Echoes was going to test the limits of her ability.

That was all the time he had to prepare.

Long before the Cruel Sight finished weaving itself from mist, the

blood-soaked hall of the somber cathedral exploded with violence and motion.

Welthe's eyes suddenly shone with a hypnotic scarlet light, and Mordret staggered as he was dashing forward. A pained groan escaped from his lips, and his movements slowed down considerably. In the next moment, the body of the female sentinel shimmered and disappeared.

Moving with terrifying speed, Welthe lunged forward, then spun, her slender saber colliding against something midair. The clashing of blades echoed amid the black stones, and two fissures appeared on the layer of blood covering the floor, as if someone was sliding back, pushed away by the force of the impact.

At the same time, the eight Echoes attacked. The creatures moved with the frightening precision of soulless machines, coordinating their assault with enough cohesion to make them a fearsome threat. Although their intelligence couldn't compare to actual humans, the morbid effigies retained enough of the skill of their originals to fight almost as human warriors would.

Each of them possessed an Aspect, too.

Saint collided with their formation like a demon born out of darkness, her kite shield receiving a rain of blows as the Midnight Shard shot forward. The Soul Serpent submerged into the shadows and flowed through them, appearing behind the six advancing Echoes to lunge at the two whose Aspect Abilities allowed them to perform ranged attacks.

And lastly, there was Sunny.

Pierce descended upon him like a siege ram, bringing down his longsword with enough force to make the whole hall tremble. Even augmented by two shadows, Sunny was still unable to compete with the Master in terms of physical ability… but the gap between them wasn't large enough for him to be instantly overwhelmed.

Sidestepping, he received the edge of the enemy's sword on the vambrace of the Undying Chain, angling it in a way that allowed for

most of the force to be deflected instead of absorbed, and threw his other hand forward, the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard glinting dimly as it appeared out of nowhere, aimed at Pierce's throat.

The Master simply lowered his head, allowing the tip of the stiletto to slide off the cheek guard of his helmet, and pushed the hilt of his sword forward, trying to deliver a crushing blow to Sunny's chest.

Sunny jumped back, not at all disappointed by the failure of his treacherous blow. It had not been meant to do any damage, anyway. It just had to buy the Cruel Sight time to finally manifest itself into a material form.

And now, it had.

Sunny thrust the somber spear forward, forcing the enemy to dodge out of the way and give him a moment to breathe.

'...Strong… the bastard is just too strong…'

Through the insight of Shadow Dance, Sunny could see and understand some of the Ascended knight's battle techniques. Pierce possessed explosive strength and enough agility to channel it into almost inescapable attacks. His understanding of combat was tremendously deep, sharpened by years upon years of relentless training and countless battles.

A warrior of such skill was not going to be led into an easy trap.

His control of soul essence was also on a completely different level. From what Sunny could perceive, the Master was using it with terrifying efficiency, achieving results that he himself couldn't even dream of, especially without the help of Soul Serpent.

That was the core difference between them, and his main disadvantage.

The only advantage he had, really, was the Undying Chain. The transcendent armor was durable enough to withstand a few blows from Pierce, and his high divine affinity only made it stronger. He just had to make sure that he doesn't receive the brutal blows

directly.

His body beneath the bleak steel was not as resilient.

Neither he nor Pierce possessed Aspect Abilities capable of dealing direct damage, so this fight was going to be decided by skill, cunning… and the hidden aces they were saving for the right moment.

Problem was, Sunny didn't really have any aces left. At least none that would work on the fearsome Master. He was already going all out…

Sunny had a split second to check on how the others were doing before resuming the deadly dance of death with Pierce. He quickly glanced to the side, and saw the Soul Serpent entangled with the two Echoes, dodging destructive attacks as it slithered around them.

Saint was forced into a defensive stance, being barraged by constant strikes as she somehow managed to deflect all of them with the Patient Avenger and the Midnight Shard.

Mordret and Welthe seemed to be at a temporary stalemate, too… or at least that was how it seemed. The second Master was moving too fast, and their battle was too bizarre to really tell.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'Curses!'

He couldn't divide his attention anymore. If he wanted to win against Pierce, he had to focus all of it on him.

And make sure that the bastard had no time to pay attention to anyone else, as well…

Chapter-586: Cold Steel

Sunny used everything he had, moving with unimaginable speed, agility, and precision. Both shadow essence and the tenacious blood of Weaver flowed through his body, supplying his muscles with the strength and endurance necessary to perform with such an inhuman level of effort.

His mind was aflame, devouring information about his surroundings and the enemy's movements, making lightning-fast decisions, trying to predict countless probable eventualities, and simultaneously studying the sophisticated battle style of the battle-hardened Master.

…And despite all that, he was barely surviving Pierce's unrelenting assault. Every moment, he was just a split second away from death.

The knight of Valor was just too powerful, skilled, and overbearing. His cold eyes were full of calculating ruthlessness and dark, iron killing intent. They were calm and focused, like that of an experienced predator stalking helpless prey.

That prey, unfortunately, was Sunny.

'Damnation!'

Nothing he had experienced could have prepared him for this. Sunny had fought many opponents that were stronger and faster than him, but he had never been this outmatched in terms of sheer power, at least not in a fight against a human… who, unlike most Nightmare Creatures, also possessed a keen mind, devious cunning, and martial skill that were the greatest weapons of his kind.

Maybe only Morgan of Valor… but she had held back, and theirs had not really been a battle to the death.

Sunny and Pierce clashed on the bloodied stones, their weapons

flashing through the air fast enough to leave afterimages behind. The clangor of metal filled the somber hall, mixing with the furious sounds of battle coming from their left.

There, two different storms of metal raged violently, one centered around Mordret and Welthe, the other from where his Shadows fought the Echoes of the fearsome Master.

Sunny had no time to look that way, but he could hear the constant ringing of blades landing on Saint's shield. There were so many blows that their sounds almost merged into one dreadful, uninterrupted litany of steel. He had not heard the Spell yet, so he knew that none of the Echoes had been destroyed.

The Shadows were in one piece, as well…even if he didn't know whether or not they were whole, damaged, or dying.

He deflected another strike of Pierce's swift longsword, then whipped the butt of the Cruel Sight forward, hoping to catch the enemy in the face. Helmet or not, such a strike was bound to deliver some damage…

Pierce received the blow calmly… and didn't even flinch. Instead, he lunged forward and rammed into Sunny with his shoulder, sending him flying back.

'Curse that bastard! Is he made of stone or what?!'

Sunny twisted in the air and landed on his feet, tasting blood in his mouth. That shoulder bash was powerful enough to shatter a stone wall.

His tempered bones had not shattered, though.

Gritting his teeth, he immediately shifted, dodging a powerful thrust, and brought his spear down on the enemy.

'Fine… this is fine… the longer I survive, the better I understand his style… the better I understand his style, the longer I'll survive…'

The two of them fought ferociously, neither showing any sign of doubt, hesitation, or weakness. Yes, Sunny was younger and less

powerful… but he was skilled and experienced, too. He was ruthless and cunning, too.

He was a killer himself.

Pierce had managed to land several debilitating blows, rattling his entire body. The Undying Chain held, but beneath it, Sunny was bruised and battered.

However, he had been able to break through the knight's defense and deliver a few strikes of his own. The results were less than ideal, though. Even when he succeeded in thrusting the tip of the Cruel Sight through a crack in the enemy's armor, it was like trying to cut through a monster's hide. He only managed to burn the bastard a little, and make a few drops of blood roll down…

Why was divine flame not as destructive as it should have been? What was wrong with this monster?!

Pierce pushed him away, briefly glanced at the shallow wound, and grinned darkly, not showing any indication of being bothered by it.

"...Is this all you can do? Not enough… not nearly enough, little rat."

Sunny growled.

"Shut your mouth! You suddenly have time to waste breath?!"

With that, he attacked again, this time switching the enchantment of the mirror blade from incandescent flame to invisible, insidious soul damage.

Pierce snarled and deflected the blow without too much effort.

…It was almost time, though.

When the Master decided to speak, without doubt aiming to distract and agitate the opponent, Sunny had a split second to steal a glance at how his Shadows were doing.

The Serpent was on the verge of destroying one of the Echoes, and had already wounded another.

Saint was doing worse. Faced with six opponents, she couldn't launch a successful attack. Some of the Echoes surrounding her were severely wounded, but none seemed to be close to death.

That was not her task, though.

Actually, Sunny preferred that she didn't eliminate any of the Echoes. He wanted them all in one piece, constantly attacking the taciturn knight.

Landing more and more blows on her shield.

The Patient Avenger…

By now, its surface was glowing with an angry orange light, as if there were furious flames burning beneath the cold steel. And there were, in a sense.

A string of runes surfaced in his memory:

[Cold Steel] Enchantment Description: "This shield can store a portion of impact damage it receives to augment another weapon of its wielder or unleash an immolating wave of fire."

Well… by now, the Patient Avenger received more than enough impact damage to unleash an ocean of flame. A few more strikes, and it was going to overload, sending all that fire outward.

Just as Sunny thought that, two more strikes landed on the shield, and the angry orange glow turned brighter, slowly turning incandescent white.

Currently, Saint was wielding the Blood Blossom charm, as well. With all the dismembered corpses lying around, its enchantment had long reached its limit, augmenting all the Memories the Shadow wielded with rampant strength.

Sunny blocked Pierce's strike and slid back, his hands trembling from the force of it.

At the same time, Saint spun and deflected two more swords with her shield. Its surface was almost entirely white now.

'Almost there… d—damn...'

Sunny gave a mental command, and the shadow that had been augmenting Saint flowed from the graceful demon's body onto the furiously shining shield.

Another blow landed on the Patient Avenger.

Saint braced, putting her shoulder behind it.

'Crap!'

…And in the next moment, a terrifying explosion rattled the entirety of the inner sanctum.

Chapter-587: The Explosion

Just a moment before the Patient Avenger detonated, Sunny fell backward and dove into the shadow cast by a wide stone pillar. He noticed a hint of surprise in Pierce's eyes, and in the next second, everything was suddenly drowned by blinding white light.

The sound came next, a thunderous roar that would have probably destroyed his ears if he had not turned into a shadow. Then, the shockwave arrived, obliterating the pillar and turning it into a mass of flying rubble. Sunny's shelter was destroyed, and he was thrown back into the corporeal world… just in time to be engulfed by a terrifying, immolating flame.

Luckily, he had summoned the Memory of Fire at the very start of the fight. Protected by its enchantment and by the Undying Chain, Sunny had withstood the terrifying heat. His eyes were tightly shut, and so only his eyelids were singed.

The explosion… had turned out to be much more powerful than he had expected.

'D—damnation…'

The hall was completely decimated. The pillars supporting its ceiling had been destroyed, and its walls had cracked, some sections crumbling completely. The bodies of the murdered Lost were practically erased from existence, and everything was obscured by a cloud of stone dust mixed with thin crimson mist, which had appeared after the pool of blood had evaporated.

In all this mayhem, Sunny was able to sense a few familiar shapes. The Serpent had merged with the shadows before the explosion had hit, too, so it was unharmed.

Saint, however, was not as lucky — her entire left arm had been torn

off at the shoulder, the onyx armor mangled and revealing scorched alabaster skin. Fine ruby dust was flowing from the terrible wound, falling to the floor like a stream of a morbid hourglass, as if counting off how long she had left to live.

That was the result of augmenting and overloading an Ascended Memory… even the wielder was not safe from the consequences, as it turned out.

Sunny's mouth twitched, and he immediately dismissed the taciturn knight, then called back his third shadow.

In the short moment before it reached him and wrapped itself around his body, he managed to sense the rest of the devastated hall.

The Echoes seemed to be obliterated. Welthe was kneeling at a distance, shaken and superficially wounded, but still alive. Mordret was sprawled on the floor, seemingly thrown out of his invisibility.

…Only Pierce was still on his feet, as if not affected by the explosion at all. His armor was battered and scorched, wisps of smoke rising from the cracks, but the Master himself appeared unperturbed. In fact, his murderous intensity only grew more suffocating.

He was like an impregnable stone cliff that could never be brought down by the raging winds.

Not wishing to reveal himself, Sunny suppressed an infuriated growl and silently dashed forward.

The silver blade of the Cruel Sight whistled quietly, shooting toward the bastard's heart.

However…

At the last moment, Pierce shifted and easily deflected the blow with his sword, throwing the spear off course. His armored fist flashed, flying toward Sunny's head.

When the blow connected, Sunny was blinded for a moment. His eyes were still closed, but it was as if something exploded behind his eyelids, and at the same time, his mind blanked. He only felt the

world spinning.

Disoriented, Sunny continued his lunge and collided with the fearsome Master. The impact threw them both to the ground in a clatter of metal.

They flew back, then collided against the stone floor. Pierce grabbed Sunny by the throat and drove a knee into his abdomen, causing another explosion of pain to spread through his body and sending him rolling over his head and away.

…But not before Sunny's free hand snaked toward one of the cracks in the Ascended Knight's armor and planted something deep into his flesh.

A long, narrow needle forged out of black steel, with gold wire wrapped around one of its ends.

Driven with all of Sunny's strength, the Heavenly Burden sunk into Pierce's flesh almost entirely, with only a few centimeters sticking out of his skin and barely visible in the narrow fissure marring the surface of the knight's armor.

Of course, such a tiny needle was not going to wound a Master seriously, or even slow down his movements. But damage was not what Sunny used it for.

Rolling on the ground, he twisted and landed on his knees, sliding a few steps back and almost instantly regaining his balance.

A few meters away, Pierce was already rising to his feet, too. His eyes were brimming with killing intent, and his longsword was glistening as it reflected the flames burning around them. He was ready to finish this fight...

But then, something strange happened.

The fearsome Master suddenly swayed, a confused expression appearing on his face. A moment later, the soles of his armored boots separated from the stone floor and rose into the air.

…The Heavenly Burden was the Memory Sunny had exchanged for

contribution points after helping Master Jet put down the demented Awakened, Shadow Blade Kurt. Its single enchantment was simple and straightforward: living beings pierced by the needle would float up, and up, and up, until it was removed.

Sunny had acquired it to combine the enchantment with the Dark Wing and receive the ability to fly out of the Sky Below, if need be.

Which did not mean that it had no other uses.

…Pierce was rising into the air, his feet already a full meter above the floor. His initial confusion was gone, and he swiftly looked down, at the tip of the needle buried in his flesh. The Master's hand shot toward it, but the fingers of his armored gauntlet were too thick and clumsy to dig the needle out on the first try.

Sunny had no doubt that he would manage soon. He was also fairly certain that the Ascended knight possessed at least one Memory in his arsenal that would be able to help him either counteract or control the effect of the Heavenly Burden.

However, both of these options were going to require some time, no matter how short.

The time that Sunny wasn't going to give him.

He thrust his hand forward, sending the Moonlight Shard flying toward Pierce's eye. Without anything to use as purchase, the knight was deprived of the very foundation of combat ability — the warrior's connection to the ground. He couldn't move to dodge, couldn't control the distribution of his weight to mount an effective defense, and couldn't even use most of his strength.

However, Pierce still managed to deflect the ghostly stiletto with his sword…

Which left him open and defenseless to Sunny's true attack.

As soon as the Moonlight Shard left his right hand, Sunny brought his left up and behind him, used all of the strength the three shadows gifted him, sent a flood of essence into his muscles, and cast the Cruel Sight forward.

His throw was performed with perfect form, just like Effie had taught him.

At the last moment, the three shadows flowed from his fingers and wrapped themselves around the somber spear's silver blade.

Pierce's eyes widened.

The Cruel Sight shot through the air like a black comet and sunk into the fearsome knight's chest. The force of the throw was so great that it went right through his damaged armor, his tough skin and bones, and then his heart.

Still affected by the Heavenly Burden, the Master's body was sent flying up with terrifying speed and impaled on the stones, hanging lifelessly from the tall ceiling of the devastated hall.

A stream of blood fell down like crimson rain.

Sunny staggered then supported his weight with his hands and let out a shaky breath.

'Come… come on…'

A moment passed in silence, and then, he finally heard the painfully familiar voice.

This time, the Spell's whisper sounded like beautiful music to his ears:

[...You have slain an Ascended human, Pierce.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Gods... I actually did it...'

Sunny smiled darkly, allowed himself a second of rest, and then rose to his feet, knowing that the battle was not over.

Mordret and Welthe were still there, both as deadly as the damned bastard he had just killed.

He dismissed the Cruel Sight and immediately summoned it again, simultaneously checking on his reserve of shadow essence. Sunny had spent a lot, but not so much as to worry… yet.

The Soul Serpent appeared from the shadows and slithered onto his skin, turning into an intricate tattoo.

Still keeping his eyes closed, partially out of caution and partially because his eyelids were burned and hurt like hell, Sunny extended his shadow sense forward and tried to understand what was happening to the other two participants of this hellish battle.

Welthe was standing some distance away from him, swaying. Her hands were pressed against her face.

Meanwhile, Mordret…

Sunny froze.

The female sentinel... was dead.

He had not noticed it before, but she was laying lifeless on the floor, her neck twisted at an unnatural level.

'How… how can this be?'

Something was not adding up… how could Mordret lose his only vessel so easily? He had only fought one of the Masters… surely, he had the ability to defeat Welthe one on one. Otherwise, what had he been planning to do if Sunny allied with the knights of Valor? How had he planned to resist both of them, let alone with a third enemy added into the mix?

The Prince of Nothing could not have been that weak…

Suddenly, a small detail attracted Sunny's attention.

One of the sentinel's hands was clenched in a fist, something dangling from it.

A piece of a torn chain…

...Didn't that chain feel awfully familiar?

A cold, uneasy feeling appeared in Sunny's chest. He turned his head slightly and concentrated on the last survivor of the Valor forces, searching for...

Welthe suddenly laughed. Her voice sounded strange and different.

And her amulet... the anvil amulet was gone.

The Master lowered her hands and smiled.

"Ah! That is much, much better…"

Chapter-588: Trust Issues

'Mordret… he has taken Welthe.'

Sunny shifted, lowering the Cruel Sight and slightly turning its blade. His heart was full of unease, his mind in the throes of a dark premonition. The banished prince had already been monstrously powerful… how much more deadly would he become in a body of a Master?

A few things were now clear, at least. Out of the two Ascended knights, Welthe had been the more powerful one. Her Aspect possessed Abilities that could debilitate her enemies, all the while enhancing her own physique. That was why she had been the one to sap Mordret of a large portion of his strength and attack him.

And yet, it was strange to see that the Prince of Nothing had struggled to defeat her so much, and for so long. If he couldn't win against one of the Masters, how had he ever planned to face both?

However, if he had decided to take Welthe's body and thus couldn't harm it too much… that would explain his tardiness. Fighting an Ascended elite while not being allowed to wound her was a dreadfully harsh task.

Had Mordret been aiming for Welthe's body from the start, or had he changed his plans on the fly when the opportunity presented itself?

Was his intention to take Sunny as his vessel just a ruse, a misdirection… or was Sunny still in danger?

'No way… he already has a body of a Master. There is no reason to abandon it for the sake of mine. Right?'

"Ah! That is much, much better!"

Mordret straightened, then stretched, looking at his own arms with curiosity. He clenched Welthe's fists, then grimaced slightly and let his hands relax. Finally, the Prince of Nothing turned slightly and looked at Sunny with a smile.

"...Wouldn't you say, Sunless?"

Sunny lingered for a moment, then nodded cautiously.

"I guess. How does this work, exactly? Are you an Ascended now?"

Mordret's smile widened a little.

"So curious. Your inquisitive nature is truly worthy of an Academy researcher."

'Dodging the questions like always, huh?'

Sunny sensed the slender saber laying by the former Master's feet, then concentrated on the corpse of the female sentinel for a moment.

"So… what now? How are we going to escape this place before the Saint arrives?"

The Prince of Nothing bent down, picked up the saber, and sighed.

"Oh, that… don't worry. I do have a plan. It's just… I am not sure that you are going to like it very much, Sunless."

Sunny felt cold shivers running down his spine. Mordret's tone was still friendly, but the implication behind his words did not promise anything good.

'Bastard! He's going to double-cross me, isn't he?!'

Well… it's not like Sunny had not been planning to do the same.

He gritted his teeth, then said somberly:

"...We don't have to do this, you know. It is just like you said… there's no quarrel between us. We can just go our separate ways. Maybe even work together… uh, for a bit. Let's be friends?"

Mordret chuckled.

"Oh! I would like that very much. But, Sunless… if you really want to be my friend… why do you still have your eyes closed?"

He took a slightly awkward step forward, as if not yet entirely used to his new body.

"It's hard to trust someone who refuses to look you in the eye, you know. Why don't you look at me, huh, Sunless?"

Sunny paled, then backed away a little.

"I… I'd rather not. My eyelids hurt."

Mordret grinned.

"That is a pity. But oh well… to tell you the truth, we wouldn't have become real friends, anyway."

Sunny took another step back, then asked tensely:

"Oh yeah? Why is that?"

The Prince of Nothing stopped smiling. When he spoke, Welthe's voice sounded cold and insidious, full of endless darkness:

"Do you take me for a fool? Did you really think that I would not smell the stench of Dreamspawn on you? Huh? You better tell me, Sunless… why did Asterion send you to the Chained Isles? Why hunt down my Beast? What is that abomination scheming now?"

Sunny scowled.

'...What?'

He was genuinely confused. If his eyes weren't closed, he would be blinking in surprise right now. Did Mordret really lose his mind?

"I have no idea what the hell you are talking about. What stench? Why would I be sent by Asterion? I've never met anyone by that name, let alone knowing anything about their schemes! Are you

hearing yourself, you lunatic?!"

'Wait a minute… the prince… the Dreamspawn… could it be?'

Mordret froze, then tilted his head a little.

"Huh… how curious. You can't lie, so this must be the truth. But if you never met Asterion, why do you reek of Dreamspawn?"

Sunny grimaced, not wishing to answer. However, he had no choice. Surrendering to his Flaw, he uttered through gritted teeth:

"I… may have met another Dreamspawn."

The Prince of Nothing raised his eyebrows, surprised.

"Really? Who?"

'Goddammit!'

Sunny clenched his fists, then said darkly:

"...Nephis."

Mordret frowned.

"Nephis… Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan? Wait, she is still alive?"

Sunny nodded, and the banished prince threw his head back, laughing.

"Oh! Oh, my! So there is another Dreamspawn walking the Dream Realm, and she is the daughter of Smile of Heaven and Broken Sword! This must be fate… ah, I wonder if the old bastard knows…"

While Mordret was laughing, Sunny was feeling cold all over. Not because of this sudden outburst, but because of what the Prince of Nothing had said right before.

'You can't lie… so this must be the truth. H—how does he know that I can't lie?'

Since when had Mordret known about his Flaw?

Had he simply figured it out after watching Sunny for a few months? No, that wasn't possible… Sunny had not spent that much time in the Dream Realm after escaping the Sky Below, and especially not communicating with a lot of people outside of selling them real-world items. He had not done anything to compromise himself…

What… what was going on?

Chapter-589: Dark Mirror

For a moment, Sunny's heart grew heavy, his mind consumed by murderous darkness. He thought that he had been betrayed again…

There were very few people in the two worlds who knew the secret of his Flaw. Nephis was one, but she was far away. Kai and Effie probably had their guesses. However, they chose to remain silent out of respect for his unwillingness to speak about this matter.

That left only Cassie.

Cassie, who was right here in the Night Temple and had already turned on him once…

But after thinking about it a little, Sunny realized that there had been another being who possessed the knowledge of his Aspect. The problem was that it had been dead for a long, long time.

The Mirror Beast.

The Ascended Reflection had mirrored his Aspect, so it had to have glimpsed it somehow. And it was connected to Mordret far more thoroughly than Cassie ever could be.

The Prince of Nothing had not known everything about the Shadow Slave Aspect before, Sunny was sure of it. Back in the abyss of the Sky Below, Mordret had expressed genuine curiosity and surprise about things that he would have already learned otherwise.

Which meant… which meant that he had most likely only received that information after the mirror shard was brought into the Night Temple. It also meant that he was only informed about what the Mirror Beast had learned, and what had been true then. If this guess was correct, maybe Sunny would be able to use a gap in Mordret's knowledge to his advantage.

…Or he was wrong, and Cassie had really betrayed him again.

A lot of things depended on whether or not he was ready to trust her again. His very life, most likely.

Sunny frowned, then said, his voice even:

"You seem to be having fun. So… now that you know that I have nothing to do with Asterion, whoever that might be, are you going to rethink your previous plans and leave me be?"

Mordret chuckled.

"...What do you think?"

Sunny sighed.

"Honestly, I don't know what to think anymore. Not when it comes to you, at least… you really are a devious bastard, you know that, right? Oh, don't take it as an insult, by the way. Coming from me, it's actually a compliment."

The Prince of Nothing shook his head, then took another step forward.

"Well. A mirror can only reflect what is in front of it, Sunless. Is it my fault that the things in front of me are cruel, vile, and deceitful? I think not… then again, maybe it is. Either way, I don't really care. Blame your bad luck for being of use to me, if you wish."

His eyes ignited with a hypnotic scarlet light, and although Sunny's own were closed, he suddenly felt slow and sluggish, strength draining from his muscles. He swayed, and used the Cruel Sight to support himself.

"Argh! W—wait… before we start this, answer me one last question…"

Mordret smiled.

"...Sure. Why not. What do you want to know?"

Sunny strained, as if trying to speak. His mouth opened…

But instead of saying anything, he simply attacked.

The Prince of Nothing laughed, amused by this little deception. His saber flashed forward to meet the blade of the Cruel Sight.

A moment later, though, his laugh abruptly stopped.

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Sunny had no illusions about his chances in the fight against Mordret… not when the bastard occupied the body of a powerful Master, one whose Aspect allowed him to weaken his enemies and strengthen himself, no less.

But then again, when had Sunny ever fought fairly?

From the start of it, he had been subtly manipulating the banished prince. Every step back he had taken was meant to bring them into the right positions. The angle at which he held the Cruel Sight had been calculated so that the mirror blade only reflected what Sunny wanted Mordret to see…

Or rather, so that it didn't reflect what Mordret was not supposed to see.

And at the moment of his attack, his efforts finally paid off.

…Because, in the end, he had chosen to trust Cassie after all.

The blind girl silently appeared at the entrance of the hall, behind the banished prince. Her eyes were hidden by the silver half-mask, but the polished steel armor and the midnight blue coat were gone. Instead, she was wearing the familiar light tunic and a cloak the color of sea waves.

This was the Memory gifted to her by Nephis, one that Changing Star had received after slaying an Awakened Terror in her First Nightmare. The armor that possessed an enchantment which made enemies less likely to pay attention to its wearer.

Unnoticed, Cassie knelt and placed something on the floor in front of her.

It was a large wooden box, its surface engraved with a complicated weave of a beautiful, but disorienting pattern. The lid was still slightly opened, rising above the lip by a few millimeters.

Sunny suppressed a grin.

'Good thinking…'

The box had not been part of the plan, but Cassie seemed to have made a correction when a beneficial opportunity presented itself.

The moment the blade of the Cruel Sight met Welthe's saber, the blind girl grabbed the lid, threw it open… and then poured her soul essence into the box.

Inside, the mirror trap was lined with plates of polished silver, each reflecting the one opposite it, thus creating an infinite labyrinth of reflections. The pattern on its surface shined with a pale glow.

Mordret staggered, his laughter cutting short. His hand seemed to weaken.

Sunny easily pushed the saber aside and thrust his spear forward, aiming to end the fight with one ruthless strike. However, the Prince of Nothing wasn't done yet.

He recoiled, narrowly avoiding the killing blow. Even though the tip of the Cruel Sight pierced Welthe's flesh, the wound wasn't fatal. In the next moment, Mordret disengaged, jumping back and staggering as he raised the saber into a defensive stance. His eyes darted toward the wooden box.

"That cursed thing…"

Blood was streaming down his side, but the banished prince didn't seem to care.

Neither did Sunny. He dashed forward, feinting a downward slash, then turning it into a swift thrust. Who knew how long Mordret

would be slowed down by the mirror trap? It hadn't helped the forces of Valor. He had to finish this fast…

Mordret barely deflected the attack, moving with visible strain. His mouth twitched.

"Hey Sunless… why don't you… go and destroy that box?"

Sunny pushed forward, closing the distance between them and simultaneously turning the Cruel Sight into a sword. It flashed through the air, but was deflected once again. Even with his powers reduced so direly, the prince was still a formidable fighter.

Mordret bared his teeth.

"No? Ah... but I must insist. Why don't you go and kill that little oracle of yours…"

His eyes gleamed with vicious amusement.

"...Lost from Light? That is your True Name, is it not? Do it!"

Sunny froze. His sword trembled.

Then, as his face become pale as a ghost and his pupils widened in horror, he slowly turned, facing Cassie. A strange sound escaped from his lips.

Mordret smiled, slightly relaxing his guard.

…It was at that moment that the Cruel Sight shot toward his body, easily sliding past the slender saber.

Sunny scoffed.

"...Why don't you go to hell? I already have a master."

Chapter-590: The Host

Indeed, it was as Sunny had thought.

Mordret had learned his secrets from the mirror shard left behind by his Beast. He didn't really know of his Aspect… he only knew of its reflection.

And that reflection was incomplete.

That was why the cunning prince had assumed that he would be able to enslave Sunny by using his True Name. Of course, Mordret would have been careful, taking the possibility that Lost from Light already had a master into account… but Sunny was half a step ahead. He had doused that caution by being ready to pretend to be enslaved…

And then attacked.

...The Cruel Sight shot forward, narrowly avoiding the mirror fiend's saber and sinking deep into his flesh. It cut through the enchanted black tunic, pierced Welthe's body, and emerged from her back.

Mordret's face contorted, his eyes full of shock and pain.

Sunny, of course, couldn't see it, since he was still relying on shadow sense to navigate the world. All he felt was a tremble that went through his enemy's body.

A moment later, the Prince of Nothing groaned, a stream of blood escaping from his mouth.

Then, he lashed out with the saber, forcing Sunny to stagger back. The Cruel Sight slid out of the terrible wound, wrecking more damage on its way back. Sunny was slightly disappointed that he had not been able to end the fight right there and then, but it hardly mattered.

The wound he had delivered was not immediately fatal, but deadly nevertheless. Now, all he had to do was wait for the enemy to bleed out… even a Master's body was not resilient enough to stem the flood of blood he had caused…

Mordret, it seemed, realized the same, and dashed forward in a desperate attempt to kill Sunny before the blood loss made him too weak.

…Or so Sunny thought.

'What…'

Instead of attacking with the saber, the Prince of Nothing used it to push the Cruel Sight aside, and continued to move forward, eventually colliding with Sunny and grabbing him by the throat.

'Is he crazy?!'

At such a close distance, Sunny had all the advantages. Mordret couldn't slash with the saber, but he could easily bring his shortsword back for a killing thrust, long before anyone would have been able to strangle him.

This attack made no sense...

However, in the next moment, he felt that something was wrong.

And then, his chest was pierced by a blinding explosion of pain.

Sunny screamed and staggered back, falling to the floor. Somehow, against all logic, the Prince of Nothing seemed unscathed again, the bloody gash on his torso gone.

Instead, it was as though Sunny had run himself through with a sword. He could feel a deep wound in his chest, even though the surface of the Undying Chain remained unbroken.

'C—curses…'

Fighting through the pain, he rolled away, dodging the descending saber. Luckily for him, Mordret did not pursue, instead choosing to

dash toward Cassie and the mirror trap.

'Damned… damned Welthe!'

Although Sunny was not entirely clear on what had happened and how he had ended up with a hole in his chest, he had an inkling. Welthe's Aspect seemed to be all about devoiding the enemy of their power while enhancing your own… almost as if transferring it. A Master had three Aspect Abilities…

Was her third Ability capable of transferring wounds from her body to that of others?

If so… was he going to die by his own sword?

No… no, he wouldn't.

Unlike Mordret, Sunny was not going to bleed to death. In fact, he was barely bleeding at all. His body was pierced and heavily damaged, but fortunately, blood loss was one of the two causes of death he was practically immune to.

The other being broken bones.

The evolved Weaves of his body would not allow such a thing to happen.

"Argh!"

Growling from pain, Sunny stood up and swayed slightly. He didn't feel too well… in fact, he felt pretty terrible. Every breath was torture, and his heartbeat was strange and irregular. Every contraction sent a pulse of suffering rolling through his body.

'It's alright... I've been through worse… I think…'

Sunny willed the Midnight Shard to manifest itself into existence, and tried to assess what was happening around him.

Mordret was already upon Cassie, his saber flashing toward her neck. The blind girl met his attack with a skillful block, the Quiet Dancer ringing clearly as it deflected the enemy's blade. The blind girl

survived…

However, she was pushed back, away from the mirror trap.

As soon as her hand left the surface of the wooden box and the flow of soul essence was interrupted, the glow of the engraved pattern shimmered, dimmed, and was then extinguished.

Mordret sighed.

"...Not bad, guys. Truly, a valiant effort."

He glanced at the mirror trap, and then brought the saber down on it, turning the box into a pile of splinters and mangled silver plates.

Sunny shuddered.

'...Crap.'

Released from the burden and back to the full might of his stolen body, the Prince of Nothing inhaled deeply, an expression of delight on his face. Then, he turned to Sunny and smiled amicably.

"Now, who should I deal with first…"

At that moment, the austere tachi finished manifesting itself into existence. The [Unbroken] enchantment activated, filling him with newfound power. Its effect wasn't as incredible as when he had been a mere Sleeper, but still quite pronounced.

Holding the Midnight Shard in one hand and the Cruel Sight in another, Sunny willed the mirror blade to ignite with the incandescent light of the divine flame, and grimaced.

"Come here, your royal highness. I can promise to kill you quickly."

With Sunny in front of him and Cassie behind, Mordret laughed.

"So fun… ah, what a pity. I am really going to miss you, Sunless…"

With that, he blurred and was suddenly just a step away, the slender saber falling down with terrifying speed.

The two of them clashed, with one attacking and the other desperately trying to defend. The ringing of steel merged into one deafening sound. Sunny cursed...

Although it seemed like an eternity, in fact, just a second had passed. The Quiet Dancer had not even had time to reach them from the other end of the hall to help.

…And he really, really needed help.

Perhaps if he had not been wounded and under the debilitating effect of Welthe's Aspect, Sunny would have been able to hold his ground against the deadly prince. With three shadows wrapped around his body and the gift of the [Unbroken], his prowess would not have been much less than that of a Master.

But as things stood currently, fighting against Mordret was like trying to fend off a tornado. He barely managed to deflect the killing blows, but couldn't do anything against the rest of the rain of ruthless strikes. The Prince of Nothing fought with terrifying skill and purpose, not leaving Sunny any chances to retaliate… well, what else did he expect from the heir of War God?

The bastard truly lived up to his lineage...

The Undying Chain held, for now, but Sunny knew that it wouldn't be able to protect him much longer.

Even when the Quiet Dancer joined the fray, things didn't change much.

Sunny thought feverishly, trying to come up with some trick, some way for him to survive and prevail. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't think of anything he could do to win this fight.

It all seemed hopeless.

Slowly, a creeping fear settled in his heart. Ignoring it, ignoring the terrible pain nesting in his chest, Sunny gritted his teeth and continued to resist with all his might, all his cunning, and all his will.

And it was then that Cassie's voice suddenly reached his ears:

"Open your eyes!"

He shivered, suddenly experiencing a feeling of a terrifying deja vu.

'What… has she lost her mind?'

"Open your eyes… open them, Sunny!"

Was Cassie hysterical or planning to kill him? Why else would she give him such stupid advice?

Sunny couldn't come up with one logical reason to listen to her.

…In the end, it all came down to a question of blind trust.

He sighed, then strained his singed eyelids and slowly opened his eyes.

Mordret's figure came into focus, a surprised and joyful expression on his stolen face.

Sunny saw his reflection in Welthe's eyes, clad in the bleak steel of the Undying Chain. No… no, it wasn't him. There was another reflection hiding even deeper, almost lost in the darkness…

…And then, it was gone.

Something cold and alien entered him through the reflection, sinking deep into the dark depths of his soul.

A moment later, the world disappeared.

Chapter-591: Sea of Soul

Sunny found himself in the tranquil darkness of his Soul Sea.

It seemed as empty and silent as usual… the three black suns burned with dark flames above him, arranged in a perfect triangle. Small spheres of light — his Memories — floated between them like dying stars. The silent waters were vast and motionless, and some distance away, just beyond the periphery of his vision, the rows of lifeless shadows stood, unmoving.

However, this time something was different.

Sunny did not remember entering the Soul Sea, or even wishing to do so. More than that, he couldn't perceive the real world at all. Usually, visiting this place resulted in a strange split of his consciousness, with one part of it exploring the depths of his soul, while the other remained aware of his actual surroundings. It was akin to imagining a landscape… doing so did not turn you blind and deaf.

But now, he was here and only here, as nothing existed outside of this dark and silent sea.

Come to think of it, it was a lonely and frightening place. Untethered from the real world and surrounded by nothing except for deathly silence, Sunny did not feel as calm and comfortable as he usually would.

…And he wasn't really alone in the darkness.

"What a strange soul you have…"

Hearing those words, Sunny flinched, then turned around.

The voice that had spoken them did not belong to Welthe. It was familiar and pleasant, just like it had been in the lightless abyss of the

Sky Below… Mordret was speaking with his real voice once again.

The Prince of Nothing stood some distance away, looking up with a curious smile on his face. Now, for the first time, Sunny saw how he must have looked before his true body was destroyed.

Mordret was tall and slender, with pale skin and raven-black hair. He seemed to be in his twenties, older than Kai and Effie by a couple of years. His face was sharp and thin… not exactly handsome, but at the same time charming and strangely beautiful.

His most striking feature, though, were his eyes, which didn't seem to possess a color of their own, and instead reflected the world back on itself like two pools of liquid silver.

Currently, they were as dark and lightless as the endless abyss of the void.

Mordret was dressed in a simple tunic, its fabric long devoid of any color. He wore no armor, and didn't seem to bear any weapon. However, Sunny could feel immense pressure radiating from his slender figure, and knew that he was in mortal danger.

What surprised him, however, was that Mordret's face seemed familiar. In fact… he looked exactly like a slightly older, male version of Morgan of Valor. The resemblance was too striking to be a coincidence. It could only be shared by siblings…

And there was another thing that Sunny saw which made him tense and apprehensive.

All around the Prince of Nothing, he could see a pale golden glow. The same kind of beautiful radiance that hid in his own blood, and surrounded Nephis… the light of divinity.

'Curses…'

Mordret studied the three cores of Sunny's soul curiously, then looked at him with a friendly smile.

"I have never seen anything like it. How kind it was of you to invite me inside, Sunless! I really do wonder what your little friend was

thinking, though… does she, perhaps, think that you will be able to resist me?"

Sunny stared at the invader somberly, then shrugged.

"How would I know what she is thinking? Trying to understand an oracle is a fool's errand, you know."

Mordret chuckled.

"Ah, wiser words have never been said. Well, I guess we will find out soon…"

Sunny shifted slightly, then asked, his voice gloomy:

"Why would you even want to possess my body, anyway? Didn't you get Welthe already? What's so great about it that you would rather have me than a Master?"

The Prince of Nothing smiled.

"Who says I can't have you both?"

That seemed like an answer, but actually, it wasn't. Sunny had already experienced Mordret's habit of dodging questions to be misled this way. He frowned and glared at the mirror fiend, unamused.

The invader laughed.

"So serious… don't sell yourself short, Sunless. You might be just an Awakened, but then, who else should I make a vessel if I wish to Ascend myself? Plus, your body suits my current needs perfectly. You have an Aspect that gifts you both stealth and teleportation Abilities. A perfect combination for someone who wishes to escape a Saint, don't you think?"

He took another step forward and continued:

"I also have never met or heard of anyone else who possesses a Divine Aspect. Imagine my surprise when I found out that you were just like me. And that thing you have… I am very curious to find out what it

is that allowed you to make me blind, back in the Ebony Tower.

Such a powerful anti-divination artifact will make my life much, much easier… so, you see, although I am not too happy about it, taking you as a vessel is a regretful, but inevitable choice I had to make."

Sunny narrowed his eyes, trying to understand what Mordret was talking about. Making him blind… back in the Ebony Tower? Sunny had worn Weaver's Mask to read the harrowing runes on the fifth level of the stronghold of the ruler of the Underworld. Was that what the mirror fiend meant?

So the Mask had been able to hide Sunny from his spying, as well… and more than that, the Mirror Beast had not managed to glimpse its secrets. So, Mordret did not know what it was, just that there was something in Sunny's possession that could prevent him from being tracked and seen by otherworldly means.

…When he narrowed his eyes, though, something else happened.

Sunny didn't expect it, so he almost lost his composure. He had not known that he possessed such an ability, but it seemed that the evolution of the Blood Weave had enhanced his eyes, as well.

Suddenly, he was able to peer beneath the surface of Mordret's soul, just like he was able to peer beneath the surface of Memories and Echoes to study their weaves.

And what he saw there made him tremble.

'Crap...'

As a living soul, the Prince of Nothing did not possess a spellweave, of course. However, what he did possess were soul cores… six of them…

Mordret was a Terror.

And that Terror was getting closer and closer to Sunny.

"...to tell you the truth, Sunless, your body fits me so perfectly that I

even thought, for a second, that the old man had sent you to me as a gift. Gods know he has a lot to apologize for… to think that he had nothing to do with it, and all of this was just a coincidence! That funny Attribute of yours is really something, isn't it?"

Sunny gritted his teeth, and then said in a grim tone:

"That is really wonderful. I am very glad for you, pal. However… what exactly happens now? You don't really expect me to just surrender my body to you, right?"

Here in the Soul Sea, Sunny wasn't bound by his Flaw, since his words were nothing more than thoughts. It was actually a bit of a relief.

Mordret stopped, now just a few steps away from him, and smiled.

"Now? Why, what else… now, I am going to destroy your soul, of course…"

Chapter-592: Soul Slayer

Sunny looked down on himself, evaluating his own state.

The wound in his chest was gone. However, it wasn't as though he was unscathed… his body, or at least this manifestation of it, seemed battered and beaten. However, it was also full of ferocious strength and vigor, as well as feeling light, as if a tremendous weight had been lifted off his shoulders just a few moments ago.

He didn't know how exactly this battle of the souls was supposed to work, but suspected that his current form was a representation of his spirit. He had endured a lot in these recent weeks, enough suffering and fear to crush someone with a lesser will… Sunny, however, had survived far worse, so his strength was not diminished by much.

He was still clad in the bleak steel of the Undying Chain, and holding his weapons. Three shadows lay at his feet, and he could feel the presence of the Soul Serpent nearby. His enemy, meanwhile, was alone and unarmed.

This was Sunny's soul, after all. Here, he was bound to have the ultimate advantage.

'Let's see who will destroy whom, you bastard.'

With a smirk, Sunny commanded the shadows to rise and wrap themselves around his body. Instantly, his strength, speed, and resilience were enhanced manifold…

In the next moment, however, his expression froze.

Mordret looked at him, then smiled. As he did, six shadows descended upon him like a dark mantle, making the pressure that the Prince of Nothing exerted feel almost suffocating.

"...You didn't think that it would be that easy, did you?"

A split second later, he was beside Sunny, his fist crashing into the breastplate of the Undying Chain. As pain exploded through his body, Sunny flew back and fell onto the still water, sliding across it into the darkness.

'What?'

Before he could even rise, Mordret was already upon him, his foot slamming into Sunny's ribs. Sunny yelped as he was thrown into the air, then felt another blow landing on his chest, pushing all air out of his lungs and sending him plummeting back down.

Knowing that he had to escape somehow, Sunny dove into the shadows and emerged from the darkness behind the Prince of Nothing, the blade of the Cruel Sight shooting forward.

However, it pierced nothing but air.

Mordret had turned into a shadow himself, and disappeared without a trace, his laughter echoing across the surface of the silent sea.

"Weak! Too weak…"

Something struck Sunny in the back, sending another explosion of pain rolling through the very core of his being. He groaned and tried to slash with the Midnight Shard, but the enemy was already gone. A moment later, he was kicked in the abdomen, then ruthlessly slammed across the face.

Mordret's fist felt like a sledgehammer… no, like a mountain descending.

Half-blinded and disoriented, Sunny fell to his knees, spitting blood.

'What the… what the hell…'

This was not how he had imagined things going. The damned mirror fiend clearly had to weaken his prey before attacking… so, his victory was not set in stone. There was a way to defeat him, somehow, and since Sunny's spirit had not been broken, he had

expected to be able to prevail.

However, the bastard was just too powerful… how was he supposed to resist such terrifying force?!

Worse than that, Mordret seemed to be able to mirror all of his powers…

"Bastard! Lost from Light, stop!"

The Prince of Nothing laughed again, then struck Sunny in the side of his head, almost blinding him.

"Sorry to say this, but that trick is not going to work… this is an entirely different situation, you know…"

Hurting and hoping to escape the next blow, Sunny turned into a shadow again. This time, however, he wasn't in a hurry to attack and remained incorporeal, thinking…

Before he could form a single thought, however, another shadow lunged at him from the darkness, and suddenly, he was in the throes of indescribable agony, his very soul damaged and cracked. With a stifled shriek, Sunny escaped the shadows and assumed his human form again, only to be ruthlessly struck down a moment later.

He fell on his back and desperately gulped for air, but his lungs seemed to be paralyzed. All he could do was try to block the next blow, only for it to fail and another wave of pain spread through his body.

'Goddamit!'

Sunny used Shadow Step to disengage, but his enemy simply followed. He deflected one strike, almost managing to cut Mordret's forearm open, but the mirror fiend was just too fast, strong, and skilled.

No matter how hard Sunny fought, it was all useless. No matter what strategy he tried to implement, Mordret saw right through it. Fighting against the Prince of Nothing was like fighting against death itself — he was terrifying, inevitable, and final.

There was no escape…

But Sunny was not going to give up. At this point, he wasn't even sure that he knew how.

He gritted his teeth, endured the pain, and fought.

After what seemed like an eternity, beaten and bloodied, Sunny was thrown down again. The helmet of the Undying Chain was bent and deformed, pressing into his temple and obstructing his vision. He dismissed it and raised a hand to defend himself, but it was easily wrestled down.

Mordret had a few bruises of his own, but looked infinitely better than Sunny. Grabbing him by the throat, the banished prince inhaled deeply, and then asked in a somber tone:

"Haven't you had enough? Why don't you just surrender? I am not enjoying this one bit, you know."

Sunny looked at him through the red haze and grinned, his teeth painted red by blood.

"R—really? Ah, too bad… cuz… I'm actually having the time of my life…"

With that, he lowered his head and tried to sink his teeth into Mordret's hand.

The Prince of Nothing sighed, then hit Sunny in the face, sending him rolling away.

'Crap… that one... really, really hurt…'

Sunny slid a few meters and came to a rest just beyond the rows of silent shadows. He tried to stand up, but the world suddenly spun around, making him fall back down. A quiet groan escaped from his lips.

Mordret shook his head dejectedly, and then walked over to the Cruel Sight, which lay on the surface of the tranquil waters where Sunny had dropped it. He bent down to pick it up, but the somber spear

simply turned to tenebrous mist, dismissed by its master.

The mirror fiend remained unperturbed. He lowered his fingers into the water and caught the reflection of the fearsome Memory before it fully dissipated, then brought it up, ending up with the exact same spear in his hand.

"To think that the Spell would make it anew and return it to me... it's fitting, I guess."

He studied the Cruel Sight for a moment, then turned to Sunny, a dark look in his eyes.

"Let's end this now… no matter what you may think, I don't enjoy torturing people. Ah, unless they deserve to be tortured, of course."

Sunny finally managed to rise to his knees, and glanced at the approaching prince with a grim expression. One of his hands reached toward the hilt of the Midnight Shard, which lay some distance away, while the other was pinned awkwardly behind him.

In it, a ghostly stiletto silently appeared, its transparent blade hidden from sight by Sunny's body.

"Whatever you say…"

Mordret willed the Cruel Sight to extend to its full length, then lunged forward, thrusting it toward Sunny's heart.

Sunny tensed, preparing to dodge…

But before he had a chance to, he was suddenly covered by a massive shadow, and a long, multijointed arm appeared from somewhere above, blocking the blade of the spear with its terrifying bone claws.

Sunny blinked.

Mordret froze, too, and then slowly looked up. As he did, Sunny mirrored the movement.

...Towering above him, the shadow of the Mountain King stood silently, one of its four arms extended forward. For a moment,

nothing happened…

And then, another shadow moved slightly, clicking its chitinous claws. One of the carapace scavengers took a small step forward.

Like a chain reaction, a wave of movement spread through the ranks of the silent shadows, bringing them to life. All of them shifted, their gazes focusing on Mordret. Members of the carapace legion, dwellers of the Crimson Labyrinth, horrors of the Dark City, inhabitants of the Chained Isles... there were monsters of all shapes and sizes, each more terrifying than the other.

A horde of creatures that Sunny had slain…

There was an abominable Spire Messenger, a nest of slithering vines, a tall knight in a heavy suit of intricate armor, a strange creature with a chest in place of a head... and many, many more.

For the first time, confidence drained from Mordret's face, and he paled. Taking an involuntary step back, the Prince of Nothing hesitated, then said evenly:

"Sunless, my dear friend… tell me… why is there an army of dead Nightmare Creatures hidden in your soul?"

Sunny finally managed to grab the Midnight Shard and slowly rose to his feet, using the tachi as support. His teeth flashed in a dark smile.

"Oh… I have human souls here, too. So, don't you worry, Mordret… when I kill you… you'll have good company, at least…"

The mirror fiend chuckled nervously, then slowly brandished the reflection of the Cruel Sight.

In the next moment, the horde of shadows surged forward, descending upon him like an avalanche of darkness.

And Mordret suddenly…

Vanished without a trace, as if he had never existed.

Chapter-593: One Step Forward

Sunny opened his eyes, disoriented. The orange glow of the fire and the dancing shadows on the shattered walls, the smell of blood, the tearing pain in his chest… he had escaped the Soul Sea and returned to the scorched heart of the Night Temple.

He had prevailed… but what was going on?

It felt as if he was falling…

Why was he falling?

Sunny crashed onto the cracked stone plates of the floor and heard Welthe's body falling somewhere nearby. A tortured groan escaped from his lips, and then a stifled curse.

'What the hell…'

Although his battle with Mordret had lasted for a while, it seemed that just a single moment passed in the real world. That time had not even been enough for Sunny to properly fall down.

The Quiet Dancer was still in the same position, and Cassie was still rushing over, dagger in hand.

'I... survived?'

However, why did it feel like he was forgetting something?

Sunny strained his wounded body, trying to sit up. He felt exhausted and weak — both from his physical injuries and the damage his soul had sustained in the harrowing battle against Prince of Nothing.

What… what was it?

Cassie was already by his side, reaching out to help him sit. Her

rapier hovered in the air, and then turned, the tip of its blade aiming at Welthe's unmoving form.

'Oh, right… where did Mordret disappear to?'

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

Sunny raised his head, pointing at Welthe.

"K—kill her!"

The Quiet Dancer was already flashing through the air, reacting faster than its master. Cassie frowned.

"What? Isn't he d…"

But it was too late.

Welthe suddenly moved, her hand shooting forward to catch the flying rapier by the blade. The sharp point stopped just a few centimeters away from her throat.

…No, Mordret wasn't dead. He had simply run away, retreating from a fight that he knew he wouldn't be able to win.

Back to his previous vessel.

Cassie stared at the Prince of Nothing in shock, and then shrieked when thin cracks appeared on the blade of the graceful rapier. She hurriedly dismissed the Echo, saving it from the crushing grip, and pulled Sunny to his feet.

"What… what do we do now?!"

Sunny saw the body of the Ascended knight stirring, as if slowly coming back to life. Her hollow eyes suddenly glistened, becoming full of dark will and lethal intelligence once again.

His heart skipped a beat.

Now that Mordret had failed to both enslave and possess Sunny, there was only one use for him left. Torture the Weaver's Mask out of

him, and then dispose of what was left.

With that fiend wearing a Master's body… what were they supposed to do, indeed?

Actually, Sunny had a perfect answer.

He glanced at Cassie with a determined expression, and then screamed:

"What else?! Run!"

…Mordret wasn't the only one who knew when to remove himself from a hopeless situation.

Pushing the blind girl toward the large hole in the wall of the former stronghold of the Valor forces, Sunny turned his back on Welthe, who was slowly rising to her feet, and sprinted away as fast as he could. His eyes were tightly shut, so that the bastard couldn't spy on them through the reflections.

The Night Temple was a large place. With some luck, they would be able to play cat and mouse… or rather, mice and tiger… with the damned prince for a few days.

Hopefully, Saint Cormac would arrive soon.

As he was diving through the breach in the wall, a mocking voice assaulted him from behind:

"...What, leaving so soon?"

Feeling Mordret taking a step forward, Sunny dismissed the Heavenly Burden. Pierce's corpse, which was still pressed against the ceiling, suddenly plunged down and crashed right in front of the mirror fiend, forcing him to jump back and slow down a little.

Without turning his head, Sunny threw the Broken Oath behind him, then sent the Ordinary Rock flying into the depths of a random corridor, and ran in the opposite direction with Cassie.

As they rushed away, the Rock ricochetted off the walls and

screamed loudly in Sunny's voice:

"Run! Run! Run!"

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Sunny didn't expect his tricks to slow down Mordret for long, but with enough of a head start, they were bound to be able to disappear into the confusing labyrinth of the great cathedral. They just had to get out of the inner sanctum in time… once outside, catching them would be much harder.

He might not have been a match for the Prince of Nothing in direct combat… for now… but when it came to stealth and traversal, Sunny had a decisive advantage. Not only could he use Shadow Step to jump across large distances, but he could also use his shadows and senses to scout, spy on the enemy, and navigate in the darkness.

Mordret, meanwhile, was only able to see through reflections, which were few and far between in the Night Temple. Hiding from him was not an impossible task.

Especially with the help of Cassie and her uncanny intuition — the blind girl was going to slow Sunny down somewhat, but at the same time, having her with him was a boon.

Just as he thought that, Cassie suddenly pulled him into a barely visible mouth of a narrow corridor, which then led them to a small staircase. They ascended it and ran through a circular hall, sliding down the domed floor and then climbing back up.

As they did, an echo of a deafening crash reached their ears, announcing that the Prince of Nothing was not too far behind.

What was the bastard doing, breaking through stone walls instead of searching for a path?!

The interior of the Citadel was bizarre and confusing, so Sunny quickly lost his sense of direction. All he knew was that they weren't moving toward the familiar exit out of the inner sanctum, nor were they approaching the central bell tower.

His doubts were dispelled, however, when Cassie opened a narrow wooden door, and cold wind hit him in the face.

Somehow, they had reached the grand hall of the cathedral, where the broken Gateway stood in the center of the vast basin of the craterous dome. Instead of entering it through the tall gates of the inner sanctum, Sunny and Cassie appeared on a hidden gallery circling the hall's perimeter high above.

Almost at the same time, a familiar figure emerged from the gates far below.

Chapter-594: Two Steps Back

Mordret was right below them, walking out into the great hall of the somber cathedral at a relaxed pace. Above his shoulders, a dozen blinding orbs of light hovered in the air, throwing white reflections of the dark stones.

Sunny silently stepped back, pulling Cassie with him. Pressed against the back wall of the gallery and safely hidden in the deep shadows, they slowly moved away.

Below, the spheres of light suddenly shot in different directions, illuminating a large portion of the dark nave. Luckily, their radiance did not reach the hidden gallery, be it just barely.

…What it did reach, though, were the hundreds of mirror shards scattered around the vast expanse of the inverse hall. Each of them shone, reflecting the white light.

It was as though countless stars suddenly ignited in the darkness.

Sunny silently cursed, knowing that those shards served Mordret as eyes. Who knew how many more were hidden throughout the cathedral? Without slowing down, he dismissed the Memories he had left behind, and continued moving toward the distant end of the vast circular chamber.

The Prince of Nothing, meanwhile, tilted his head a little:

"Where are they hiding? I wonder…"

Suddenly, he was surrounded by a whirlwind of white sparks. Sunny did not linger to see what Memories Mordret was summoning, and instead concentrated on reaching another door.

Before the sparks of light coalesced into tangible shapes, Cassie and

he had already left the gallery, finding themselves in another corridor.

They had successfully left the sanctum behind and were now in the main structure of the Citadel. It was a large and convoluted space, so finding them here was not going to be easy — from where they stood now, just outside the nave, they could go anywhere in the temple proper, exit into the outward ring, or descend into any of the six belfries.

They could even circle back and try to hide in the seventh, the main bell tower, hoping that the mirror fiend would not expect them to return.

However, somehow, Sunny doubted that escaping Mordret would be that easy.

The morbid remains of his butchered victims were all around them, after all. None of these people had escaped...

He hesitated for a moment, then pulled Cassie in the direction of the outward ring. That was the part of the Citadel they both knew the best, which was an important advantage. Of course, the banished prince understood that, too, which meant that he would most likely be moving there, too.

This was a risk Sunny had to take.

At the end of the day, their goal was to escape… and they could only do that by reaching the sealed gates of the Night Temple.

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A few hours passed, suffused with fear and tension. Sunny and Cassie had moved through the main structure of the cathedral, getting closer and closer to the outward ring. On the way, they took a short break — partially to eat and replenish their strength, but mostly because he simply couldn't walk anymore.

The exhaustion and pain were taking their toll on Sunny. Finding a safe spot, he fell to the floor and remained motionless for a while, breathing hoarsely. Then, he dismissed the breastplate of the

Undying Chain, pulled the shirt hiding beneath up, and tentatively explored the dire wound dealt to him by Mordret.

The result was not too good… Sunny wasn't going to die anytime soon, but neither was he going to heal quickly. For the time being, he was as good as crippled.

"Curses…"

At least he had not bled to death… that was something, at least.

He summoned the breastplate back, then opened the Covetous Coffer and took out a couple of tubes of synthpaste. The two of them hurriedly consumed the nutritious sludge, and then, it was time to get back up again.

Before that, however, Cassie handed him something.

"...Here. You hold on to this."

Sunny took the item and raised his eyebrows, recognizing the shape. It was a small piece of cold steel, shaped into a semblance of an anvil.

His fingers, though, could feel that the thing was not at all simple. In fact, it seemed like one of the most potent artifacts he had ever held…

"Welthe's amulet? When did you grab it?"

The blind girl sighed.

"After you opened your eyes. I should have tried to reach his body in time, instead. If only I had more essence, I could have seen… could have done something differently…"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then threw the amulet into the maw of the Covetous Coffer.

"Why are you so down? Yeah, we might have failed to get rid of that bastard, but then again, we've done better than a hundred Lost and two knights of Valor did. That's not too bad of an achievement, isn't

it? Plus, Mordret's plans are also ruined… he might seem in control, but trust me, that guy is in as much trouble as we are. Things didn't exactly go his way, either…"

The blind girl remained silent for a few moments, then nodded and helped him stand up.

Somewhat rested, but not at all free of exhaustion, they continued moving forward, soon crossing into the outward ring.

When they did, however, Cassie suddenly froze, then trembled.

Sunny tensed.

'What…'

Then, he heard it too — the insidious sound of approaching footsteps. And a second later, Welthe's familiar voice:

"There you are…"

Gritting his teeth, Sunny grabbed Cassie's hand and ran in the opposite direction.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it…'

His chest was burning, pulsating with excruciating pain. They moved with all the speed they could muster, but what was the point? A Master was so much faster than an Awakened. Even though Mordret didn't seem to be in a hurry, the sound of his footsteps was growing closer and closer.

Before he could reach them, however…

The whole Night Temple suddenly shook, throwing Sunny to the floor.

An explosion of pain radiated through his body, and a moment later, his Shadow Sense was not constrained by the outer walls of the Citadel anymore. It pierced the black stone and easily reached into the vast emptiness beyond.

Sunny clenched his fists.

'The seal… it's lifted!'

...The Saint had arrived.

Chapter-595: The Saints Are Coming

At that point, Sunny and Cassie weren't too far away from the gate chamber, where they had made a morbid discovery soon after escaping from the cage. Back then, the heavy gates had been closed and sealed… now, however, it seemed that they were finally opened.

Saint Cormac had returned from his expedition to the Hollow Mountains a few days sooner than expected.

For a moment, Sunny was overcome by fierce joy…

Then, however, the cold and rational part of his mind took over.

Yes, the arrival of the Saint created a path of escape, and was bound to solve their Mordret problem… most likely.

But who was to say that the Transcendent warrior would not turn out to be an even deadlier threat?

The first thing Saint Cormac was going to see after entering the Citadel was a pile of mutilated corpses. After that, he would most likely kill anyone who appeared in his way. After all, any survivor would either be a potential vessel of the banished prince… or a witness.

Sunny gritted his teeth, then rose to his feet and pulled Cassie into a side corridor. There, they hid in the shadows, wrapped her cloak around themselves, and waited. He didn't dare to extend his shadow sense toward the gates or send his shadows forward to scout, fearful to draw the Saint's attention, so neither of them knew what was going on.

A few seconds passed in terrifying silence, and then, Sunny heard

something rustle through the corridor they had just left. A gust of wind blew past them, as if left behind by something moving at incredible speed.

A moment later, they heard a distant impact, and the Night Temple trembled once again.

It seemed that Saint Cormac had already found Mordret.

Sunny pushed Cassie to her feet and hissed:

"Hurry! To the gate!"

They ran toward the exit. Soon, the familiar chamber came into view, fresh air mixing with the terrible smell of the rotting corpses. The gates of the Night Temple stood wide open, the impenetrable darkness of the Sky Below stretching into eternity beyond them.

The tall doorway seemed like a portal into the endless night.

Not slowing down even for a moment, Sunny and Cassie dashed toward freedom, passed through the gates, and finally escaped the cursed cathedral. After a month of suffering, bloodshed, and harrowing dread they had experienced in this ghastly stone trap, the air of the lightless abyss seemed sweet like nectar.

Just as they left, the Night Temple shuddered once again, dust falling from its ancient walls. Far below, the bells rang somberly, their usually melodious song sounding strangely staggered and frantic.

The Saint was battling the Prince of Nothing, the whole Citadel suffering the burden of their furious clash.

"Hurry! It's not over yet!"

The two of them dashed across the rickety bridge that swayed above the chasm of the Sky Below on rusty chains, and soon reached the treacherous stairs that skirted the slope of the Northern island.

Running up the narrow steps, both of them knew that one wrong step could potentially cost them their lives. But Sunny was unwilling to slow down. They had to reach the surface, cross the island, traverse

the heavenly chain… all before Saint Cormac was done dealing with the escaped prisoner.

'Too long… this is taking too long…'

Sunny hesitated for a moment, then summoned the Heavenly Burden.

"Climb onto my back!"

Cassie lingered, then did as she was told. He drove the black needle between the plates of the Undying Chain, cursed, and then threw his hand forward, the triangular blade of the Prowling Thorn shooting into the overhanging stone slope.

With the blind girl's weight added to his own, the speed of their ascent wasn't too fast. However, with the help of the kunai and its invisible string, Sunny was able to increase it somewhat. It was an arduous and nerve-wracking journey — the two of them were like a spider scaling a mountain with the help of a single thread of silk.

The difference was that the mountain was steeper than vertical, and there were furious winds threatening to either crush them against the stones, or throw them away into the darkness of the Sky Below.

However, after a dozen torturous minutes — or maybe an eternity — they still managed to reach the surface of the island, alive.

Sunny dismissed the needle and fell onto the soft ground, gripping his chest. There were disturbing, wheezing sounds coming out of his lungs with each breath. He lay motionless for a few moments, then allowed Cassie to pull him to his feet.

"...I know, I know. We need to move. It's not time to rest, yet…"

They ran across the field of flowers, the Hollow Mountains towering behind them. White mist was flowing down their slopes, and there was something white dancing in the air in front of them, too.

Sunny felt a pleasant cold spreading across his burning face.

His heart contracted painfully.

'Snow… it's snowing…'

Was it December already? Or did the first snowfall arrive ahead of time, as well?

There was no escaping fate...

The Northern Island trembled beneath them.

…And just a few moments later, a dark figure appeared in their way.

Sunny had never met Saint Cormac, but he recognized him almost instantly. Only a Transcended could have such a deep, unfathomable shadow, and a presence that seemed to affect the very world around him.

The Saint looked to be in his thirties, with a cold face and dark, ruthless eyes. His black armor was battered and worn, barely holding together after a month of exploring the Death Zone. Surprisingly, it wasn't too impressive, as far as armor-type Memories went. Neither was he wielding a terrifying weapon.

…His fingers, however, were covered with fresh blood, crimson drops falling down and painting the delicate violet flowers red.

It seemed that Mordret had failed to gain freedom, in the end. His last vessel was destroyed.

Saint Cormac frowned, looking at the two of them, then took a step forward. The snow swirled, surrounding him like a cold mantle. Sunny was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling of suffocating killing intent.

He shifted slightly, pushing Cassie behind him. His eyes darted around, hoping to find something… anything… that would save their lives.

Then, suddenly, the world darkened, as though a transient shadow covered the sun. A second later, the shadow was gone in a rustle of wings, and a tall, slender woman was standing between them and the approaching Saint, her posture straight like an arrow.

Sky Tide shielded Sunny and Cassie with her body and glanced at the other Transcended warrior, her beautiful face as cold and stark as always, her vertical pupils full of calm, grim resolve.

"...That is enough, Cormac. Turn back."

Chapter-596: And We Were Gone

Sunny staggered back, stunned by the sudden appearance of Saint Tyris. A tense, dangerous silence settled over the island after she spoke, with only the wailing of the wind breaking it.

Snow danced in the air, slowly settling onto the cold ground.

His heart was beating like a caged animal.

'Where did she come from… what is going on, damn it?'

Cormac scowled and looked at the slender woman with a dark expression on his stern, weathered face. The Saint did not seem amused by the sudden appearance of the leader of the White Feather clan.

"Sky Tide… stay out of this."

Saint Tyris didn't move, still shielding Sunny and Cassie with her slender body. The wind picked up, and the clouds seemed to become heavier, as if expressing her suppressed emotions.

…Only, as Sunny realized, they weren't suppressed at all. Sky Tide just didn't show them on her face. Instead, the world itself did it for her.

"I think not."

Cormac winced, resentful sparks appearing in his eyes.

"You don't know what you are interfering with, Tyris. Get out of my way. This is not your business."

She shifted slightly, the howling of wind growing louder. The violet

flowers bent, pressed down to the ground.

"...This is my land. These Awakened are of my Citadel. Anything that happens here, and to them, is my business."

The other Saint sighed, then took a step forward.

"The entire garrison of the Night Temple was wiped out. These two are the only witnesses. Are you sure that you want to make their fate your burden?"

Sky Tide frowned, then spoke, her voice even:

"If that is true, we can question them together, back in the Sanctuary."

Cormac smiled darkly, then shook his head.

"I'm afraid that won't be convenient. You might not know my task here, Tyris, but you know who gave it to me. Obstructing me in this matter is the same as obstructing the will of Valor… you wouldn't want to do that, would you?"

A corner of Sky Tide's mouth suddenly twisted upward. She stared at the fearsome Saint, and said, a hint of mocking in her voice:

"What is he going to do? How is he going to punish me? Exile my clan to a remote frontier region, maybe? Oh… wait…"

She took a step forward, as well, her tone changing, becoming darker and heavier. The clouds swallowed the sun, submerging the world into shadows.

"You have forgotten, Cormac… I am Sky Tide of the White Feather clan, not Valor. I am a vassal of the King… not his servant. Six years ago, I looked the other way and allowed your odious scheme to happen. I have regretted it ever since. This is my land, my isles. You are only a guest here.

I warn you… do not test the limits of my hospitality!"

As she spoke the last words, a deafening thunderclap resounded,

rolling across the Chained Isles like a herald of heavenly wrath.

Cormac stared at her, unimpressed. An expression of contempt appeared in the depths of his cold, dangerous eyes. The Saint moved his shoulders, as if stretching his muscles, and then said darkly:

"Your arrogance is so tiresome, Tyris. Warn me? What gives you the courage to warn… me? You say that I have forgotten, but it is you who doesn't seem to remember. Who I am. What I am.

And what I am capable of…"

He stepped forward, his killing intent growing thicker and more suffocating, almost palpable.

"What gave you the idea that this is a negotiation? You will stand down, or I will put you down. Either way, the result will be the same."

Saint Tyris lingered for a moment, then looked over her shoulder at Sunny and Cassie. Her gaze was calm and somber.

"...It's time for the two of you to go."

Sunny took a step back, his mouth suddenly dry. He opened it, trying to force out a question:

"But… but what about…"

Sky Tide was already looking at Cormac, who was approaching with steady steps. Her hair danced in the wind like a stream of pale gold.

"Run! You won't survive the fury of this battle!"

Sunny hesitated for a split second, then grabbed Cassie and ran. They dashed away from the two Saints, heading for the distant edge of the island. He didn't know what a fight between Transcendents would look like, but had no doubt that mere mortals like the two of them had no place in the middle of it.

'Crazy… the world has gone completely crazy!'

A moment later, something collided with a thunderous roar behind them, and Sunny was thrown into the air. A violent shockwave passed through his body, causing a short scream to escape from his mouth.

He hit the ground and felt it shifting, as if a powerful earthquake was happening mere meters away. Sunny struggled to rise back to his feet, then helped Cassie do the same and continued to run. Shards of stone flew past them like bullets, and the snowfall was already turning into a furious blizzard.

Behind them, two vast shadows rose into the sky.

One was a giant bird of prey, her feathers white, her sharp beak and devastating talons forged out of lustrous, polished steel. Her enormous wings were wreathed in thunderclouds, and bolts of lightning danced around her body like a radiant mantle.

The other was a ferocious wyvern, his black scales as dark as the abyss, with mighty muscles rolling under them like iron chains. The head of the creature was crowned with twisting horns, and in his maw, countless sharp fangs glowed darkly, illuminated by immolating red flame burning in the depths of the beast's adamantine body.

Tyris and Cormac flew into the skies, soon disappearing in the veil of storm clouds. A terrifying roar rolled across the island, and then, another shockwave hit, tearing a hole in the blizzard.

Boiling blood suddenly streamed from above, falling on the snow like vermilion rain.

'Gods… oh, gods…'

Sunny and Cassie could only run. From time to time, a violent tremor threw them to the ground. The hurricane wind threw snow and sharp bits of ice into their faces, and their ears were ringing from the thunderous cacophony of the titanic battle happening somewhere above them.

They were almost to the edge of the island, ready to jump onto the

chain, when there was a sudden lull in the terrifying havoc.

And then, two shadows fell down from the skies, so fast that Sunny couldn't even tell who was who.

The Saints collided against the center of the island with such force that its surface swayed like water. The shockwave of the impact was so fierce that it instantly obliterated the field of flowers, blew away the top layers of the soil, and made the stronghold on the northern edge crumble into dust.

The ground itself split open, a wide crack spreading to both ends of the isle, cutting it in two.

The Northern Island shuddered… and then crumbled, large pieces of stone breaking off and flying into the darkness as more and more cracks appeared, and the tension of the heavenly chains tore the island apart.

Sunny, of course, could not appreciate the full scope of the disaster. All he could sense was that they were sent rolling down once again, this time even more violently than before. Only this time, instead of soil or stone, what they found beneath them was… nothing.

The ground disappeared, and Sunny found himself falling down, down, down. Down into the endless darkness of the Sky Below.

All he could do was grab Cassie and hold her close, making sure that they weren't separated.

Bloodied, mangled, and weak, they plummeted into the abyss as all around them, devastation reigned.

The Night Temple cracked, then disintegrated into a rain of black stones. The seven bells rang mournfully as they disappeared into the void.

The colossal chain that served as one of the anchors of the Chained Isles shot toward the Hollow Mountains, colliding with their slopes with enough force to make the ancient slope shatter and create a momentary hole in the veil of flowing mist.

…Luckily for Sunny, his eyes were still closed, so he didn't see what hid beneath.

And somewhere in all this chaos, the two Saints continued their harrowing battle.

Sunny held Cassie tightly and fell, happy to be getting further and further away from that clash with each second.

After a while, the sounds of the fighting disappeared far above.

The signs of destruction disappeared, too, as well as the last remnants of the light.

Now, they were falling through absolute darkness in complete silence and solitude, with nothing threatening their lives.

…It was sort of peaceful.

Sunny sighed, finally allowed himself to open his eyes, then glanced at Cassie and forced out a weak smile.

"...See? We're not dead. Your vision was a bust, again."

She trembled.

"How… how are you so calm? We are falling into the Sky Below! Not dead… yet!"

He tried to laugh, then winced and decided against it.

"This place is actually not so bad. Just wait for a little… we'll fall for a bit more, and then I'll summon Memories to either guide us back up or push us toward the rift. We have food and water, at least… you won't believe what I had to eat the last time…"

Remembering the dead mimic, Sunny shivered.

"Yeah, this is definitely not bad. Believe me… it could have been so, so much worse."

However…

As soon as Sunny said that, something changed in the lightless void.

A swift shadow shot toward them, surrounded by a circle of furious light.

'What…'

Before Sunny could even react, two hands extended toward them, one grabbing him, the other closing around the nape of Cassie's cloak.

With nothing to stand on, they were as defenseless as Pierce had been moments before Sunny killed him.

'Damna…'

"Oh, thank gods! I found you!"

He blinked.

That voice… why did it sound familiar?

Sunny stared into the light, his eyes slowly adjusting to it. Soon, he was able to see the shape of a paper lantern that floated in the air, just above the shoulder of a tall, infuriatingly handsome young man in a needlessly fashionable armor.

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again.

"...Kai? What the hell are you doing here?"

The charming archer smiled, an expression of joy and profound relief appearing on his face.

"What else? Rescuing you, of course…"

Chapter-597: Welcome Aboard

"Hold on for a bit more!"

The archer strained a little, bearing their weight as he darted through the abyss, his flight swift and effortless. Illuminated by the paper lantern, the three of them traveled through the darkness like a small comet, moving faster and faster.

The wind whistled in Sunny's ears.

He remained silent for a bit, dumbfounded, then asked:

"Wait… was it you who brought Saint Tyris here?"

Kai smiled, looking somewhere far away.

"Of course! When you and Cassie didn't return to the real world, we knew that the negotiation with the representatives of clan Valor must have failed. But when you didn't arrive at Shipwreck Island by November, as the plan had been, it was clear that something went wrong. So, Effie and I waited for a bit, then went to the White Feather clan for help."

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"Eventually, we decided to come to the Night Temple ourselves. That was a week ago. We have just arrived yesterday."

'But the Citadel was sealed…'

Sunny frowned, suddenly catching an inconsistency in Kai's words.

"Wait… a week ago? How did you cross the Chained Isles so fast?"

The archer smiled brightly.

"...Look ahead!"

'What does he…'

Sunny glanced forward, and froze.

They were swiftly approaching another source of light, this one much, much larger. Or rather, it was moving in their direction, even faster than Kai was flying.

A few moments later, a graceful shape of a resplendent wooden ship became visible, flowing through the darkness of the Sky Below as though on water. Its sails were pristine white, and around the main mast, a young tree was growing, its branches brimming with vibrant green leaves.

…The Fire Keepers had succeeded in repairing the ancient vessel after all, it seemed.

It looked elegant and swift, its hull devoid of the cracks and breaches that had marred its surface before. A patchwork of replacement boards still stood out on the polished wood, and here and there, the structure of the ship seemed rickety and slapdash — especially near the bow, which had been previously almost destroyed. However, overall, the vessel was a magnificent sight to behold.

There was a battery of light Memories illuminating the ship, an especially bright one burning at the tip of a long and sharp bowsprit. Human figures could be seen on the deck, moving around in a hurry.

Sunny stared at the swiftly approaching ship, stunned by the sight of it. It was hard to believe that this had been the same abomination-infested wreck he knew.

Now that the ancient vessel was repaired, it looked almost the same as on the golden coins he had sacrificed to the altar of Noctis.

Kai accelerated even more, then slowed down, and landed on the wooden deck smoothly.

Feeling a solid surface under his feet, Sunny swayed a little and looked at the Fire Keepers that surrounded them.

Then, he sighed, and fell down, instantly losing consciousness.

After the terrible day… no, the terrible month he had, some rest was long overdue.

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A couple of hours later, Sunny came back to his senses. He was laying near the main mast of the ship, under the branches of the young tree, a soft pillow under his head and a warm blanket covering his body. He still felt terrible, but mostly due to the soul damage Mordret had dealt him — the physical wounds were not bothering him too much anymore.

It seemed that while Sunny was out of it, the healer of the Fire Keepers, Shim, had treated him.

'...I am actually alive. What a miracle.'

He grimaced and sat up, then stared into the darkness for a bit. The ancient vessel was swiftly flying through the abyss, descending into its depths. Due to that, his body felt nice and weightless.

Sunny dismissed the outer layer of the Undying Chain and studied his chest, where the terrible wound had already closed, be it just barely. Now that he was conscious, he would be able to stitch it up, or at least cover the gash with a bandage… as well as properly take care of the countless smaller injuries on his body.

Satisfied with his state, Sunny looked around, noticing Cassie sleeping nearby. Her face was calm and peaceful.

He remained still for a few moments, coming to terms with the fact that their harrowing adventure seemed to be over. Of course, in the future, he was going to have to deal with its consequences… and even before that, the Second Nightmare awaited, perhaps much more terrifying.

But at least they were free of the damned Night Temple.

'What a fiasco…'

He didn't get to dwell on his frustration for long, however, because a delicious smell suddenly reached his nostrils, and a few moments later, Effie appeared nearby, carrying two plates of something that seemed like real, freshly cooked food.

Sunny's eyes glistened, and his mouth instantly watered.

The huntress grinned and handed him a plate.

"Here you go, doofus. Welcome aboard!"

He flashed her a smile, and then attacked the food like a ravenous beast. Effie sat down on the deck and placed the second plate near Cassie, who stirred awake soon after.

A few minutes were spent in silence, disturbed only by the sound of energetic chewing. At some point, Kai landed nearby and joined them, an easygoing smile on his face.

Finally, Sunny was done with his meal and pushed the plate away.

"Hey, Effie. About that marriage proposal of yours… I might have changed my mind…"

She scoffed.

"Pfft! You wish."

He chuckled, then glanced into the darkness that surrounded them from all sides.

"...From the fact that we're descending, I get it that we are going toward the Ebony Tower?"

Kai nodded.

"Yes. We are moving down and toward the Tear, as fast as we can. You will have to guide us to the rift in the flames once we reach them. We… whatever had happened in the Night Temple, we thought that Ascending should take priority. Not to mention that facing the fallout as Masters might change everything."

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then smiled crookedly.

"Good thinking."

As soon as he said it, though, his face darkened.

Sunny suddenly looked up, and then paled a little.

"...Get ready. Something is approaching."

They hurriedly stood up and summoned their weapons. The Fire Keepers did the same, staring into the darkness with tense faces.

A few moments later, something landed on the deck with a wet thud. Sharp fangs glistened, reflecting the light of the lanterns…

It was the head of a giant black wyvern, torn viciously at the neck. Its eyes were glassy and empty, and its tongue hung lifelessly out of the terrifying maw, the red flames that had once burned within it gone.

Saint Cormac… was dead.

The realization sent a shiver through Sunny's body, and a split second later, Sky Tide was suddenly standing above the head of the slain Transcendent, her face cold and expressionless.

Tyris looked battered, her graceful armor torn and bloodied. Her golden hair was disheveled, some strands of it painted red. Her presence, however, was unchanged.

It was calm and steady.

She looked at the four of them, and frowned.

Then, her gaze slid lower and focused on the empty plates.

"...Do you have more food? Bring it. I am famished."

Chapter-598: Broken Balance

As the Saint ate, not at all perturbed by the head of the terrifying wyvern staring at her with dead eyes, the rest of them stood awkwardly and waited for her to satiate her hunger.

Sunny observed Sky Tide with a somber expression, then glanced at what remained of the fearsome Transcendent Cormac. His heart was heavy.

'...Damnation.'

Being the cause of a hundred Lost and two Masters dying — one of them by his own hand, no less — was already bad enough, not to mention that the whereabouts of the sole prisoner of the Night Temple, Prince Mordret, were currently unknown… also as the direct result of Sunny's actions.

But causing the demise of a Saint was nothing short of an utter disaster.

Saints were irreplaceable. In all of humanity, there were just a few dozen. Cormac's death was not going to go unnoticed… or unpunished…

'Would I even be able to return to the real world?'

Sky Tide finally finished her meal, then drank some water and glanced at Cassie and him.

"What exactly happened in the Night Temple?"

The two of them looked at each other. After a few moments, Sunny spoke, his voice somber:

"...Everything went wrong from the very start. As soon as we arrived,

one of the Masters discovered a piece of mirror in my belongings. That shard… I picked it up on Reckoning island. There was apparently a person imprisoned in the Citadel, and he escaped his bindings with the help of the mirror I delivered, somehow."

He paused and studied the Saint's face, trying to ascertain if she had known what would happen. Tyris certainly knew of the Mirror Beast… however, she could not have known that Sunny used to carry the mirror shard the creature had left behind.

His attempt to read anything on her face failed, so he was left without an answer.

With a sigh, Sunny continued:

"The Masters destroyed the Gateway and sealed the temple. After that, the escaped prisoner slaughtered the Lost, and took possession of a Master's body. He even stole the knife from the shattered altar. In the end, it was just the three of us left alive… and he would have probably killed us, too, but Saint Cormac arrived just in time. You know the rest."

Saint Tyris stared at him for a few moments, then shook her head.

"So the prince still lives… how could this be?"

She frowned and looked straight at him:

"Where is he now?"

Sunny shrugged.

"That we don't know. Saint Cormac must have destroyed his body, but as to where his soul went… your guess is as good as mine. He is probably hiding in one of the mirror shards, falling into the Sky Below with the rest of the Night Temple as we speak."

Sky Tide remained silent for a while, then sighed.

"I see. You did well to survive. Don't worry about the rest… there are no witnesses left, and even the Citadel itself is gone. I will deal with the fallout, as well as I can. However, it will be good for the two of

you to disappear for a while. Proceed to the Seed of Nightmare as you have planned, and challenge it.

By the time you return… if you do… the worst part will be over. The situation will be different, too."

She rose and glanced into the darkness of the Sky Below, a somber expression on her face.

"...Now that the Hollow Mountains anchor is no more, the Chained Isles will shift and change position. That will cause a mass migration of the Nightmare Creatures, both those from the surface and those from the dark side. Even some of the Corrupted abominations might move to new hunting grounds. I will have my hands full for the foreseeable future… so, we won't see each other again for a long time.

Good luck to you."

Sunny stared at the beautiful Saint, then at the head of the wyvern. He cleared his throat:

"I am sorry, Lady Sky Tide… but won't you be in trouble? Killing a Saint is not something that can be simply forgiven, no matter your status. Right?"

Tyris lingered, then shook her head.

"I will be punished, sure. But not too severely. Do you understand why?"

Sunny glanced at his friends, who had the same confused expressions.

"Not really."

She sighed.

"There are… were twelve Saints who swore loyalty to the Great Clan Valor. One less than those who are sworn to the Great Clan Song. Now, there are eleven, while Song still has thirteen. With Song Seishan back from the Forgotten Shore, that number will soon increase even further, while Lady Morgan is still too young and lacks

the experience to challenge the Third Nightmare.

The balance of power will be broken."

Sunny listened to her words attentively.

'So the great clans are at odds with each other… the two strongest are, at least. Makes sense…'

Sky Tide frowned, remained silent for a few moments, and then said:

"With the gap widening so drastically, Valor can't allow to lose me. Or any more of their Saints. So, I will be fine... more or less. That is also the reason why you will be, too."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Us? What do we have to do with any of this?"

Tyris smiled slightly, looking at him, Cassie, Effie, and Kai.

"Right now, the four of you are just people who have raw potential. You are valuable, but not irreplaceable. However, should you survive the Second Nightmare and Ascend… you will prove that you have the courage, skill, and determination to realize that potential. You will prove that you can be Saints, and thus become precious.

When you return, the great clans will not only be unwilling to eliminate you… they'll be fighting for the right to have you."

Sunny scowled, connecting that statement with what Master Jet had told him before. His eyes grew bleak.

"...What if we don't want to be had?"

Sky Tide looked at him for a while, then turned away. Her voice sounded even:

"Then you are out of luck."

With that, she jumped up. A gust of cold wind suddenly enveloped the deck of the flying ship, and a moment later, a massive shadow

separated from it and shot upward, soon disappearing into the distance.

Sunny, Cassie, Effie, Kai, and the Fire Keepers were left standing in the darkness alone.

After some time, the huntress shifted and sighed heavily.

"She... she ate all my food. What a disaster! What a tragedy..."

Chapter-599: The Flying Ship

The flying ship soared through the darkness, descending deeper and deeper into the empty void. After Saint Tyris had left, nothing much happened for a long time.

They were surrounded by nothing, and nothing bothered them.

This was the oppressive nothingness that Sunny was familiar with all too well.

However, now, things were different. The first time he had fallen into the Sky Below, he was alone and desperate, without any way to escape and no certainty of what awaited him below. This time, he was surrounded by people, knew where he was going, and that they would be able to turn back at any point, if need be.

Not to mention that Sunny had a whole ship to explore, as opposed to plummeting down atop the corpse of a dead devil.

The ancient vessel was not giant, but large enough to make their journey rather comfortable.

There was an upper deck, the main cargo hold, the lower deck stretching from the bow to the middle point of the ship, the auxiliary cargo holds beneath it, and various compartments near the stern, including living quarters for the crew, two separate mess decks, a spacious captain's cabin, several smaller cabins that seemed as though they were meant for either guests or officers, a large war room, and a few service compartments.

Currently, there were less than thirty people on board, so there was more than enough space for everyone. In fact, the vessel seemed rather empty and rough around the edges — the members of Cassie's cohort and other Fire Keepers that joined them to assist in the repairs had done a splendid job of restoring the flying ship's overall integrity,

but had had no time to work on its interior.

A few essential facilities had been haphazardly outfitted with everything necessary to barely function, but most of the compartments still required a lot of work. There was no furniture of any kind except for some crude tables, chairs, and flimsy hammocks, and most of the vessel looked empty and barebones.

It was a far cry from how luxurious it must have been furnished, outfitted, and decorated once, in the ancient past.

However, after the hellish month Sunny had spent in the Night Temple, this environment seemed almost like paradise. He had a whole cabin to himself, and the cargo hold was stocked with enough food and water to last them for a few months. The galley was also fully operational, so at least their meals were taken care of.

More than that, the flying ship did not wobble constantly up and down like a seafaring one would, and instead swayed gently from time to time, which was sort of calming, and even a bit cozy.

It was a strange vessel that moved partially due to sorcery, the sapling of a sacred tree growing around its mast serving as the source of it, and partially due to the wind.

The Fire Keepers seemed more or less capable of operating the sails, be it somewhat tentatively, and used either their Aspects or Memories akin to Cassie's wooden staff to produce gales that pushed the ship in the right direction.

As the result, their descent into the abyss was swift, smooth, and almost relaxing.

Sunny spent around a week slowly recuperating from his wounds, restoring his strength, and resting. He slept a lot and ate as much as he could, knowing that the Second Nightmare was going to test the limits of his endurance. He had to enter it in as good of a shape as he could.

He also used that time to think about what had transpired in the Night Temple, analyze everything he had learned about Mordret, and

go over each of his thoughts and decisions, trying to learn from his mistakes. The memory of being fooled and manipulated by the Prince of Nothing still haunted him.

There was also a lot of new information Sunny had received in that month — information about the Awakened of higher Ranks, Anvil of Valor, the great clans, the tension between them… and even about his own Aspect.

The silent shadows that dwelled in his Soul Sea were not there just for decoration, after all. He had always suspected that there was a purpose to them, but never had any proof.

Well, now, there was proof. Sunny just had no idea what it all meant, and what he was supposed to do with them. No matter what he tried after the battle with Mordret, the shadows refused to react. They just stood in their usual spots, silent and lifeless just like before, as if pretending that nothing had happened.

It was almost like he had imagined the whole thing...

In the end, Sunny had to accept the fact that the mystery of the shadows was going to remain unsolved, for now.

He had learned that his soul had a fearsome defense system against those who would try to possess it. That was something, at least.

…After the first week, when his injuries healed enough, Sunny started training, slowly conditioning his body for the deadly trial ahead. This was somewhat of a useless process, really, since he would be inhabiting a different vessel entirely inside the Nightmare. But training the body helped him put his mind in order, as well.

For that reason, Sunny practiced with the same ferocious determination as back in the Dark City. Kai, Effie, and Cassie joined him, too, working on improving their own condition, as well as learning how to work together as a single unit again.

It had been a long time since the four of them fought side by side. All of them had grown since then, both in terms of power and experience. They were Awakened now, possessed new Abilities, and

had improved in their understanding of combat, technique, and skill.

They needed to find new and better ways of enhancing each other's strengths and shielding each other's weaknesses, as well as cooperating seamlessly to achieve a common goal.

Without the guiding hand of Changing Star, it was much harder than they had remembered. None of them was really a natural leader, let alone one as talented and gifted in the art of battle as Nephis had been, back on the Forgotten Shore. Only now, faced with her absence, did Sunny understand how hard it actually was to build a powerful, cohesive, and effective cohort.

Still, they did their best.

…A few days before they reached the rift in the divine flames, with the air outside of the flying ship already growing sizzling hot, Sunny woke up and stared into the darkness for a bit, then sighed and went to the galley to find something to eat.

The food was tasty, but not very luxurious.

And, once again, he failed to meet this day by drinking a cup of coffee, with a lot of sugar, and maybe even real milk — as he had wished to do once, a long time ago, in the cafeteria of the Awakened Academy before venturing into the Dream Realm for the first time.

Today was the day of the winter solstice.

Sunny had turned nineteen. Last time, he celebrated his birthday in a blood-soaked castle standing in the middle of a cursed city.

This time, he was going to celebrate it aboard an ancient ship that flew through a lightless abyss, descending toward an ocean of flames.

'...It is somewhat of an improvement. I guess?'

Chapter-600: The Departure

Sunny was not going to do anything special on that day, more so because the whole crew was in a bit of a melancholic mood. This was all of theirs first winter solstice after escaping the Forgotten Shore, so the Fire Keepers huddled together, remembering their fallen friends and wishing the young Sleepers who were going to enter the Dream Realm come night well.

However, Effie and Kai had other plans. It seemed that Cassie had told them that this was his birthday, so the huntress cooked up something special, and the four of them had a comparatively lavish dinner on the smaller mess deck, sharing the tales of what had happened to them in the past year and laughing about this and that.

Laughter was much better than sorrow.

Especially considering that none of them knew when they would have an opportunity to laugh again.

…On the next day, the dark void around them was already hot enough to make moving on the upper deck hard. All of them dismissed most of their armor and worked the sails, their bodies glistening with sweat. Everyone worked together to keep the ship afloat and moving in the right direction, divided into two shifts.

One would control the vessel, while the other retreated inside to cool off and drink water. Luckily, with the hot air blowing from below, they didn't need all of the sails to achieve their goal, which made things easier.

It had taken Sunny almost a month to reach the divine flames before, but the flying ship made the journey faster. Using several Aspect Abilities and ingenious tools, they were also able to navigate the abyss with a sufficient level of precision, quickly reaching the Tear and continuing to descend in a wide spiral.

The memory of the golden string of fate was still burned into his mind, so, by knowing where the Twisted Rock had been located in relation to their position, Sunny was able to guide the ship toward the rift in the ocean of divine flames.

By the evening, it was already visible, looking like a tiny black hole in the incinerating tapestry of furious light.

However, the rift wasn't really that small. It just appeared so because of the distance. Sunny had almost missed it the first time, flying through the very edge of the rift and being burned by the divine flames. This time around, they were going to keep to the very middle of it, separated from the immolating orbs of white fire by many kilometers of empty space.

Hopefully, that would be enough to keep them from dying of heat.

The sails were hoisted, and the ship continued to plummet toward the flames, supported only by the sorcerous power of the sacred tree and the ancient enchantments permeating the hull. Sunny was left alone at the helm, the rest of the crew seeking shelter in the main cargo hold, where the air was coolest.

He had summoned the Undying Chain and the Memory of Fire, augmenting the protective charm with all three of his shadows. As the flying vessel came closer and closer to the rift, the leaves of the young tree rustled above him, and ghostly runes suddenly appeared on the surface of the ancient ship.

Slowly, the heat retreated a little. Standing on the upper deck was still hard and uncomfortable, but at least tolerable — especially with the help of his charm.

Sunny carefully guided the vessel into the rift, keeping to the very center of it, as far away from the walls of divine fire as he could. It was as though he was guiding the ship through a vertical tunnel that twisted slowly, moving left and right, forward and back.

Luckily, descending didn't require a lot of skill from the helmsman. Sunny was barely acquainted with how to steer a boat, let alone a flying one the size of a frigate, so he wouldn't have been able to do

much if things went wrong.

But they did not.

Some time later, the ancient vessel left the rift and submerged into the darkness once again, the skies above burning like a sea of flame. He sent the ship flying toward the island that loomed in the void, not too far away, and let out a relieved sigh.

They had made it.

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They moored the ship to one of the horizontal stone masts protruding from the island, and disembarked. Walking across the obsidian pillar, everyone reached the solid ground and stopped, staring at the somber landscape in front of them in stunned silence.

The Ebony island was just as the last time Sunny had visited it. It was cut out of dark stone and floated in the endless emptiness, surrounded by drifting slabs of shattered obsidian. A tall and magnificent pagoda stood in its center, built of a flawlessly black, lusterless material that seemed to devour any light that touched it.

Here and there on the desolate surface of the island, remains of mysterious structures stood, long turned to ruins. Several obsidian pillars protruded horizontally from its edges, stretching into the empty void like strange wharves. The flying ship floated near one of them, fastened to it by strong chains.

Effie stared at the Ebony Tower, then turned to Sunny, her face uncharacteristically pale.

"...I can't believe you made it all the way here alone. How did you even survive?"

Sunny hesitated, then shrugged.

"Barely. And with a bit of luck."

With that, he sighed and headed toward the dark tower.

Near its doors, it was time for the four of them to say goodbye to the Fire Keepers. Cassie's cohort, and the rest, were not going to follow them into the Nightmare — some would maybe challenge their own in the future, when they felt ready, but one year was really not enough to prepare most of Awakened for this harrowing trial.

Instead, the Fire Keepers were going to remain on the obsidian Island. Some were going to establish a temporary base there, while others would guide the flying ship back to the Sanctuary of Noctis, and then return with more supplies and enough materials to continue working on the vessel itself.

In that manner, they would travel between the Sky Below and the Chained Isles, awaiting the return of the challengers for as long as needed.

The farewell was a bit emotional, at least on the part of the members of Cassie's cohort. She entrusted the command of it to Shim, the healer, and turned away, the silver half-mask obscuring her expression.

No one knew if they were going to see each other again. For the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, parting with those who they cared about was nothing new.

However, it never became easy.

Sunny opened the gates of the Ebony Tower and guided the others into its dark halls, ascending one level after another. Effie and Kai were looking around, curiosity mixing with fear on their faces. Cassie paled terribly on the second level, where the harrowing rot had once grown from the severed arm of a deity, but did not say anything.

The hall of runes affected her even worse. Kai and Effie were guided through it by Sunny, their eyes tightly shut, but the blind girl could not do the same. Her keen intuition and enhanced senses, sometimes, were akin to a curse.

However, for that very same reason, her mental resilience was also unmatched. She gritted her teeth, and persevered.

Finally, they reached the last level, and drowned the stone arch of the portal with divine flame, taking turns feeding their soul essence to the Cruel Sight. With their combined efforts, activating it did not take as long as when Sunny had tried to do it alone.

Soon, they were standing inside a graceful white gazebo, the portal disappearing behind them.

In front of them, though, was the tranquil haven of the Ivory Island.

Slates of shattered marble floated around it. There was a beautiful meadow near the gazebo, and a peaceful grove of trees, their branches rustling under the gentle wind. Some distance away, connected to the gazebo by a stone path, stood the magnificent pagoda built out of pristine white material that was neither stone nor wood.

It was beautiful, graceful, and slightly surreal, as if too sublime to exist in the mortal realm.

And around it, the bones of a dead dragon lay, reflecting the radiant light of the sun.

They walked past the clear lake and through the jaws of the great beast, finally entering the solemn darkness of the ancient hall of chains.

Where Hope had once been bound.

Once inside, the four of them froze, suddenly overwhelmed by fatigue. Seven chains lay on the pristine white floor in front of them, each ending in a broken shackle. The shackles were marred and torn, their mangled surface inscribed with a myriad of runes.

A strange shimmering rose from their surface in ethereal wisps, coalescing into a chaotic, everchanging mass of pure darkness that pulsated in the very center of the great hall.

But it wasn't darkness, not really. Instead, it was a rift in the fabric of reality, one that could devour even light itself.

Hypnotized by the visage of the Seed, Sunny felt it, deep in his soul.

The magnetic, insidious call of the Nightmare.

This time, finally, he was going to answer it.

Sunny sighed, and then looked at his companions.

They had already said everything that needed to be said, discussed everything that could be discussed.

There was no reason to linger.

"...Are you ready?"

Effie, Kai, and Cassie remained silent for a while, staring at the pulsating darkness. Their faces were pale and vulnerable, devoid of the usual masks of confidence.

Finally, the blind girl whispered:

"What are we waiting for? It is… it is just the Second Nightmare."

Sunny smiled, then suddenly laughed.

"Indeed…"

With that, he gripped her shoulder for a moment, and then stepped forward, heading toward the pulsating rift in reality. With each step, the world seemed to dim a little, turning darker and darker.

Effie, Kai, and Cassie followed.

…A few moments later, they were gone.

The hall of chains was gone, too.

Sunny found himself standing alone in complete darkness, surrounded by utter nothingness.

In this nothingness, he heard the voice of the Spell:

[Awakened! Prepare for your Second Trial…]

He smiled darkly.

'Just like the First one… well, let's see where I land this time. I doubt that it can be any worse than before…'

The voice of the Spell thundered again, making him shiver.

[Five brave ones… welcome to the Nightmare!]

The darkness moved, turning into something else, something different.

…Sunny, however, was not paying attention.

'Wait… five? Did it say five? Who's the fifth one?! What…'

He didn't get to finish that thought, though.

His vision cleared, revealing…

[End of volume three: Prince of Nothing.]